Intentions Far From Honorable

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/15372045.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Jack Crawford, Alana Bloom
Additional Tags:	Fae & Fairies, Alternate Universe - Fae, fairie!hannibal lecter, fey!hannibal lecter, Canon-Typical Violence, Slow Burn, Slow Build, Horror, Bottom Will Graham, Top Hannibal Lecter, Creampie, Sex Magic, Blood Magic, Blood Drinking, Come Eating, Blood As Lube, Self-Harm, Cannibalism, Will Graham is a Cannibal, Body Horror, Will is a Mess, Angst with a Happy Ending, Language of Flowers, Implied/Referenced Character Death, Kind Of, TECHNICALLY Will dies but he doesn't really die, No One Thinks He's Dead
Language:	English
Collections:	Hannibal, любимчики
Stats:	Published: 2018-07-21 Completed: 2019-03-22 Words: 56,911 Chapters: 16/16

Intentions Far From Honorable

by HigherMagic

Summary

Magic user!Will and faerie!Hannibal AU. Will uses his magic to assist the FBI with missing persons/serial killers, as one of the only people who can navigate to and from the aether, where the Fey live, and communicate with them directly. When Abigail Hobbs is abducted by her father as the pressure grew on the Shrike, Will is enlisted to try and find her. Once in the aether, because of the dark nature of Hobbs, he is directed towards a creature he has never met before. Hannibal is charming, and dangerous, as most Fey are. Will has had years to hone the art of making deals with his kind, but he's about to learn that Hannibal is in a league all his own.

Notes

yooooooooooo a new AU no one asked for! I have no excuse for this, and I have no idea when updates will come or how long this fic will be but I feel like it'll be a monster, so buckle up! I will add new tags as I need them.

Title comes from this quote by Jeaniene Frost: Vampires, werewolves, fallen angels and fairies lurk in the shadows, their intentions far from honorable.

There is also art for this fic! You can find it in my Fey!Hannibal tag on Tumblr, done by myself and plaguebruises.

Chapter 1

In the middle of a field sits a little white house. Well, it once was white, but time and weather are not the kindest keepers, especially when the single inhabitant of that house spends too much time inside it. As a result, the roof is ten years past the need for replacement, the siding is weathered and worn, more grey than white in some places, smeared with green and brown stains of kicked-up mud and grass during high winds. The paint is peeling, the lawn overgrown save for the two steady tracks of dead grass where cars come and go.

Inside the house, furnishings are similarly well-worn, not in the way loved things are, but in the way inanimate objects tend to be when wholly reliant on the care of someone who doesn't much care for them in return. Dog hair, rips from errant claws and teeth, dust, and dirt are frequent visitors to the innards of the house. The floors, where they are wood, are scratched to the point of looking purposeful, the carpet thin and trodden-snow-white. The walls, plain.

Beneath the stairs lies a door, painted a brilliant red, fresh. Cans of paint sit next to it, piled up in enough stacks to suggest frequent re-coating. There are six, currently, pyramid-shaped in their formation. A seventh can sits to the side, opened recently, a red-stained paintbrush sitting atop it.

Through the door, stairs lead down and curl around on themselves, first one way, then back, so that a passer-by is turned around when headed down. The basement is entirely cement, with no gaudiness and no frills. Slate-grey walls and even, smooth-polished cement makes up the bottom. The entire floor has been sanded and worked down to a fine sheen as though many years of dancers have crept their way across it, the same way rocks become smooth with the passage of water and time.

In the middle of the floor, a ring of iron is inlaid. The ring is large enough for a grown man to lie down within it, the edges three inches thick. At the foot of the ring sits a bag of rock salt, stapled shut. There is salt scattered all around the ring, both inside and out.

It is within this ring that magic visits.

But that's getting ahead of ourselves.

Will does not want to be here. Of course, he never wants to be at the BAU building in Quantico, but it is especially so after the one and only time he saw the building for what it truly was. In the mortal realm, it sits as something flat and grey, imposing and functional in the way many Government buildings are. The windows shine black even in sunlight, forbidding an outsider to have any insight to the secrets and observations of the creatures living within.

He enters, head ducked down to avoid the wildly swinging chandeliers that only he has seen, and which are not there presently. But since he saw them, he has been unable to stop himself trying to move around them and avoid touching them. They have hands and claws, and grab at heads and hair, pick apart brains until mortals unravel. He navigates the desks placed in geometric practicality and goes up the stairs at the side of the main offices, parries the reach of the sconces on the walls, and almost collides with an intern when he shrugs his shoulder to fight off the pervasive touch of Jack's office door.

He flushes, and manages a tight smile at her. She smiles back, blank and wide-eyed, and scurries down the hall, away from him. Will steals his breath, straightens his shoulders, and knocks on Jack's office door, flinching back before he can be grabbed.

"Come in."

Jack's voice carries the only shred of humanity Will can hold onto in this building. Jack does not exist in the aether. There are some that do, their auras shadowed like something just out of focus, but Jack is solid and sure.

He touches the handle just long enough to twist it and push the door open, shuffles in and nudges it closed behind him with the heel of his shoe. Jack is sitting behind his desk, the garish white of his overhead lights giving Will a headache before he can blink. He hates fluorescence. Jack gestures for him to sit, and Will does, clutching his messenger bag in his lap.

He stops, and settles, and lifts his eyes to meet Jack's. They greet him, brown and black, Earth and stone. Solid, steady things. Will drops his shoulders and presses his lips together, itches for wine and honey.

Jack regards him with raised eyebrows, expectancy laid into the wrinkles on his forehead and at the sides of his mouth like mineral lines in stone. Will clears his throat, works his jaw to one side, then the other, and one of his legs stutters in a brief jolt, quelled when he presses both hands flat to his thighs and ducks his gaze to the little patch of facial hair between Jack's lower lip and chin.

Jack lets him sit. Lets him stare. Until Will's eyes flash up and meet his again. He sighs through his nose. Will counts the beats of his exhale, gets to four, then; "Tell me about Garrett Jacob Hobbs."

Will flinches, hard enough that the chair creaks for all its sturdiness and unyielding shape. He leans back, tips it to his hindlegs, and settles again. "Hobbs," he repeats, drumming his fingers out against his thigh. He sits forward, leans in, folds his fingers together and mimics the way Jack's hands are laced, sets his elbows to his knees and puts his thumbs under his chin. "Killing young girls in Minnesota. Eight – well, nine now. Gone with the wind."

Jack's eyes flash and Will smiles, one corner of his mouth tilted up high. High enough to hurt, the hanging man atop the gallows waiting to plummet.

"We were closing in on him when he suddenly disappeared," Jack says. Will blinks at him, slowly. "We found his wife's body, but his daughter, Abigail Hobbs, is missing. We believe he

has abducted her."

Will blinks again, sucks a long breath in through his teeth and lets it out in a single gust. He lifts his chin with his thumbs, puts his eyes to the ceiling lights that burn too harshly, and swallows, letting his hands fall. "I see."

Jack lets him stew. Lets him think. Will draws in another breath, imagines that what escapes is smoke, inhales his coffee-scented breath French-style and breathes it out in an 'O'. "I can ask where Hobbs is again," he says, mercy-killing Jack's aggravation and lowering his eyes to meet the man's again. His heels rise, ready to pounce into action.

Jack huffs, and sits back. "I'm more interested in knowing if Abigail is alive, and where *she* is," he says. Will frowns. "Hobbs, we'll find. If he hasn't killed her, he'll have to kill someone else to sate his impulses." Will grins, bares his teeth.

"Impulses are animal," he says. "Who is the Shrike building a nest for? His mate. Her. He'll keep her alive, but…" He tilts his head to one side. "Maybe not with him. Hidden away somewhere."

Jack frowns. "Do you think you'll be able to find her?"

Will hums, curling his tongue between his teeth and upper lip. He tastes wine and sour candy there, turns his tongue and slides it back sideways to feel the way the edges of his teeth drag along the sides of it. "Probably," he replies, skirts his eyes to the side where Jack's plaques are. Narrows them, distastefully. His heels settle and his shoulders roll. "I'll need some time to prepare. It will require a deep search. Might be gone for a few days."

Jack nods. He's used to working with Will by now, with all his eccentricities – not self-imposed, though he lies and says they are because Jack is the kind of man who prefers working around a man to the alternative. "Should I have someone check in on you?"

The lights flicker, or maybe they just dim, like the sun-cat is blinking at them, and Will shakes his head vehemently. "No!" he replies, sharply, and meets Jack's eyes steadily to be sure he's understood. "No one may come and go. No one. *No one*, Jack."

Jack holds up his hands, part surrender, part placation. "Alright, alright," he says.

Will stands, abruptly, throwing his messenger bag strap over his shoulder. He leans one hand on Jack's desk and holds his hand out to shake, and Jack blinks at him, but shakes his hand. Will grins at him, lopsided, and withdraws. "Always a pleasure," he says, and then turns and flees from the room. He kicks the door so that it can't grab him, pats his hands down his sides, and runs down the hallway, takes the stairs in jumps of three or five, and ducks down past the chandeliers.

He makes it outside, breathes in deeply of the fresh air and light breeze, and freezes when the sun blinks at him again.

He turns his gaze up, squinting at the stone-grey clouds. The sky is periwinkle and eggshells around a storm cloud sitting over Quantico. He grins at the sun-cat and waves, shielding his

eyes, and the clouds pass over it in a wisp of lashes as it winks back at him.

"…Will?"

Will lowers his hand from waving at the sky, turns to see Alana approaching him, hands tucked into a thick grape-leaf coat, vines of ivory and ebony making up the swirls of her fitted dress as she walks towards him. Her hair falls in waves, Earth-warm. Will ducks his head to shield his eyes from the light of her.

"Good morning, Alana," he says to her, for it is always polite to greet a friend. She is not one of the Fey but deserves just as much respect and love as one, with her charming smile and brilliant sea-glass eyes. Will often thinks of his stones and mourns that he cannot find one that does her irises justice.

"Hi," she greets, and reaches out for his hand. He slides his palm against hers and she wraps her other one over the backs of his knuckles, gently squeezing before letting him go. "You coming or going?"

"Leaving," Will replies. "I have a hunt."

"Oh?" she asks, frowning with her mouth but curiosity in her eyes. "Didn't you just return from one?"

Will nods. He rocks on his heels when the sun-cat blinks, casting them both into brief shadow, yet the air is humid and he does not shiver in the chill. "I'm to find a girl," he tells her; "A murderer's lost pup."

Alana blinks at him, rapid-fire like a semi-automatic. Braced for the recoil, Will ducks his eyes and sets them on her shoes. Black, modest, functional, but pretty. There's a line of silver along the edge where pale flesh meets the shoe. His fingers curl.

"Should you be…going hunting again so soon?" she asks, tripping over the terminology Will uses for those who are not magic users like he is. Alana has remarkable intuition and compassion, but she cannot navigate to and from the aether like Will can. No one can, as far as he knows. None except those born within it, and even then, there are rules.

Will smile trembles, his teeth slide together asymmetric and rough, tectonic plates and sandpaper. He jerks his head away, fixes his eyes on the parking lot, and she takes a step back like she's offended him.

"Abigail Hobbs might not have that kind of time," he tells her, slowly, soft. In the parking lot, his mount waits for him. In this world, it is a grey Volvo, reliable and secure and not too advanced or too young to run the risk of interference by magic. But in the aether, it is a beast, like a stag, with horns of regal onyx that could hold a man between them, and has a thick mane and feathers like that of a crow. He looks at it, and it bows its head and paws the ground, eager to hunt with him.

He smiles, rolls his shoulders, and faces her again. "I have to go. The stores will close soon. Bye!"

"I -. Bye!" she replies, turning to watch him go as he runs past her and towards the parking lot. His stag rears up and the Volvo's lights flash when he unlocks it and gets into the car. He turns it on, revs the engine, and throws it into reverse, pulling out of his parking spot. Then, drive, onward.

"Run," he tells it, and the car purrs, whines, and jerks suddenly into high gear as he peels away.

He drives up to his house and kills the engine, listens to it pop and settle in place, and then gets out. He stands in front of his house, looking up at the gaping maw of the open door, the shuttered windows staring at him like a child waiting for its mother to feed it the airplane. Mushy peas on a spoon, but Will is far more delightful a meal.

He smiles, tucks his hands in his coat pockets, and whistles, once. Short, sharp, low – then high, longer. His dogs bark, and come barreling out of the door, spreading out like feathers on a bird's wing. Only Winston comes straight to him, the brindle mutt with parted jaws and eyes that spark with intelligence. He trots to Will and sits in front of him, nose to Will's stomach, pressed close enough that his front legs have to curl up and rest on Will's knees.

Will's smile widens at the animal and Winston licks his jaws, ears perked forward, mouth closing and wet nose shiny as he breathes in deep. Will mimics him, pulls his hands free and places his palms on either side of the dog's face.

"We're going hunting," he tells Winston, whose tail swishes from side to side.

He drops his hands and Winston steps away, following at his heels as Will goes into the house. He leaves the dogs outside and lets the door remain open. It will close when they all come back in, as he has enchanted it to open and close at the dogs' presence so that they are not locked inside whenever he travels to the aether. He steps over the threshold, which is made of a single bar of iron, and heads to the red door leading to the basement.

He stops there, and pulls a pocket knife from his coat. He shrugs off the garment and throws it on the floor, and opens the knife. He carves a mark onto the door at eye height, a grid of three by three, and within the center square, he etches an 'X'.

"Let the games begin," he murmurs, and folds the knife, setting it by the paintbrush. He opens the door for Winston and then goes in after, shutting it behind them and plunging them both into darkness.

The path to the aether is well-known for those who have the ability to travel it. Will is no exception to this rule, though he has yet to meet anyone who is mortal-born, who shares his

abilities.

He walks through the darkness, counts the steps until he reaches the edge of the ring where the salt bag sits. Winston is a quiet shadow beside him, the only noise being the animal's soft pants and the click of his nails. Winston is special, Will knew that the second he saw the animal, on the side of the road, dirty and downtrodden. His mount had snorted, ears pricked forward, and turned its head as Will passed the dog, so Will was compelled to slow and try and befriend him. Since then, Winston has been a loyal guardian and companion for him.

He clicks his tongue and Winston looks up. Around his collar is a bag of small stones and trinkets, and Will lets him jump up, so Will can untie them. He loosens the slip-knot of string and wraps it around his own neck.

He kneels down by the salt bag, tears it from its staples, and grabs a handful, scattering it around the floor by his feet. Then, he rises, dusting his hands off, and takes off his glasses, sliding them into his pocket.

As soon as he does, the cellar explodes with color. His house, after many years living with magic inside, and located perfectly within the crosshairs of two ley lines, glows with aether light. Will's glasses shield him from seeing too much of the aether when moving around, especially in places like the BAU building where the chandeliers are, and without them, he is given the ability to truly see.

The air around him is a deep sea foam, flickering with red and blue at the corners of his eyes. He knows better than to try and find those splotches of color, knows better than to lose himself off the beaten path of what he knows.

He takes a deep breath, holds it, releases it. He closes his eyes and steps into the ring, feeling the heavy mantle of magic sitting on his shoulders like a giant raven. He goes to his knees, then sits, legs stretched out in front of him. Then, he lies back, until he is completely prone and lying down within the iron ring.

He hums to himself, the same note he hears when the golden light swings across the backs of his eyelids.

Winston barks, once. Then, three seconds later, again. Like the countdown to anesthesia, Will listens to his dog barking, and then suddenly it stops. The air becomes quiet, and moves atop him like the press of a lover, holding him down by his neck and across his stomach.

He swallows, leans his head back, curls his fingers. His legs jerk, spread out, knees rising so he can plant his heels against the concrete floor. He trembles when the air curls around his neck, like strong, warm hands, and he has to let it take him. Wash him away like currents at the bottom of the ocean. His breathing becomes shallow and slow, too slow to give his lungs the air they want. The hands tighten on his neck and Will growls, then flings himself onto his side and suddenly the touch is gone, and he can breathe.

He opens his eyes. The ring glows golden, the sprinkles of salt stand out like fine red splatters of blood. He blinks, and sees a little creature perched beyond the ring, counting the salt granules. He pushes himself upright, rubbing his hands through his hair, and breathes in

deeply of the sea foam air. The aether always feels like breathing through a wet cloth – possible, but unnatural. He doesn't truly belong here.

He gets to his feet, sees the dark imprint of Winston lying down, keeping watch over his prone body. There are more creatures gathered around the ring, distracted by the salt that Will laid. They are bat-like, and walk on all fours, little wings and spines jutting from their back. They are the aether's parasites and will feast on the essences of trespassers unless given distraction.

Will smiles at them and steps out of the ring. They pay him no mind, too distracted by the compulsion to count the salt.

He walks up the stairs. His house in the mortal plane is unkempt, disregarded, but the house itself is old in the aether. Plain white walls are burnished with golden fire, a normal staircase turns into an arching, grand way fit for a ballroom. The ceilings are high and made of stone, the walls of gold, the floors of marble. The place is overgrown with brilliant, fertile plants that sprout new flowers whenever Will visits it, feeding off his life force.

The house creaks in greeting as he passes through the red door. He takes out his pocket knife and sees, above the 'X' he carved, there is an 'O', in the middle top space.

Will smiles, and puts an 'X' in the top right space. He pockets the knife again, and walks out of the front doors, which open like a gate guarding a King's castle. The portcullis closes behind him and he steps out into the wide stretch of the aether.

The air burns with blue and gold, and above him, the two bright moon eyes of the night-cat stare down at him, heavy lidded. The stars form its smile, and when Will lifts his head, the night-cat winks at him, first with one eye, then the other.

Will smiles, and blinks back.

He ducks his head, shivers even though the aether is neither warm nor cold. In front of him, the tracks from his car stretch out like a pure, white crystal road. He touches the bag of gems around his neck, breathes in deeply, and starts his journey towards the forest.

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep…"

Will remembers reading that poem when he was in high school, wondering if the famous Mister Frost was a navigator like him, if he frequented the aether as Will does, if he, too, met with the dwellers within it. If they frightened him, or they traded stories for the world to know who and what they are.

The forest of the aether consists of three parts. One is welcoming, brightly-lit, with flowers of moon and starlight, that reach up into gentle hands and are tended by the happier, spritely faeries within. There are places where it touches the mortal plane, sprouts wings and creates

faerie rings and temples where humans can go for communion and aid. The second is darker, lit with technicolor hues of blue and teal, and while there is light to see by, it can strain the eyes and one runs the risk of becoming lost.

The third place…Will has never ventured there. He knows better.

He follows the white road into the forest, smiles when the trees bow down to him like he is a welcome traveler. He reaches out and brushes his fingers across gold-tipped leaves, laughs as they curl around him like the hands of children enticing him to play. Behind him, his stag follows, head bowed and breaths blustering, hoofbeats silent.

The road fades from brilliant snow to off-yellow daffodils, arching up towards him like kittens and puppies asking to be petted. The life essence of a mortal brings great power to them. As Will walks, he leaves dandelions and buttercups, that sprout up with his passing.

Then, his stag passes, trampling them down and turning them black. It's a defensive measure and one Will took great care to cultivate. He can't run the risk of anything following him home.

He travels through the bright forest, and into the darker parts. The flowers here glow with life, and light his way as the trees thicken and grow sharply together, obscuring the eyes of the night-cat. Will shivers when he loses sight of its watchful gaze. The night-cat is a god, and watches over those that travel through the aether, a silent guardian and protector, but it doesn't like dogs. Which is why Will has never brought Winston here.

There is a signpost at the border between the dark and the light. Will can't read the language, but he's sure it is some kind of warning. He ducks past it, and the calls of birds, the touch of his feet on the grass, and the sounds of his stag following behind him all fade away.

His stag doesn't follow him into the dark. Will doesn't know if it is afraid, or if it knows he must be able to find his way back. Buttercups curl up around his feet, growing too-high, ready to ensnare and trap him.

He keeps moving.

He follows his well-known path, until he comes to two silver trees. He stops, touching the bag of gems around his neck, and unhooks it, ready to make his offering.

“I’m looking for a girl.”

A smile splits the darkness in two, teeth set in many sharp rows shining like someone had cut a hole in the night sky. Above the teeth, two oval eyes blink open, shut again. The beast shifts, the scent of honey and clover filling the air.

“And for charity?” it asks.

Will shakes his head, and reaches into his bag. He must take several precious stones and oddities with him whenever he visits the aether. Information does not come free from the creatures that dwell within it.

A hand snaps out from the darkness, clawed and curling like a dead spider, up-turned. Will drops a piece of rose quartz into the hand, and curls his own hand around it, forcing the creature to keep it. Luckily, this particular informant doesn't require expensive tributes.

The hand retreats and the creature's eyes go half-lidded, the glow in them and its teeth making the pink stone shine like it is worth much more than human value. Its smile widens, obviously pleased, and then its hand glows with the same pink light, and points to Will's left.

Will's gaze slides over, to where the trees grow darker and denser. The dark part of the forest, where Will dares not venture. He swallows and meets the creature's eyes before it can come too close within Will's distraction.

"What lies that way?"

"Oh…nothing pleasant," the creature replies, unblinking eyes rocking back and forth like its head is on a pendulum. Will knows better than to look away, even as its teeth come uncomfortably close and the cloying smell of lavender stings his nose and makes his eyes water. "But you already knew that, didn't you?"

Will sighs, and takes a step back, looking towards the dark parts of the trees again. The creature grins at him.

"For another gift, I will join you," it says.

Will huffs a laugh. "No," he replies. "I will go on my own."

It laughs. "Good luck, friend."

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Sorry this took a while! Please take a look at the amazing art created by @plaguebruises in my Fey!Hannibal tag!!

Will shifts, stutters, skirts the border like a bear prowling along the lines of leaves too-thick and too-square, set to hide the trap beneath. Like he's hungry, enchanted and enticed by the promise of food, of his hunt, and yet knows, knows the whispers of the trees and the warning of his father;

Do not venture that way, child. That is where the dark Fey live.

If he goes, he will surely be trapped, his life sucked from him to bloom flowers, grow trees, sate hungers of things with savage teeth and glowing eyes. And yet, the air curls around him, teal and lavender and rose blush, virginal, a path untrodden, and Will – Will is curious. Will wants to mar the land, plant his touch there, see it spread.

Behind him, his informant laughs. Will catches the glow of its rose-quartz teeth. It has eaten the stone. Will doesn't know why.

"Why do you hesitate, friend?" it asks. "I've told you where you need to go."

Will rises, heels up, haunches tensed, then back down. The scent of otherness is overwhelming here, thick and cloying, honey mead and clover. It's sickening, nauseating, and he wants to clutch his stomach and curl, but that will expose his neck and his companion has too many teeth for comfort.

He steps to one side, then the other, as a stallion might dance when threatened with a bridle. Perhaps if he sprints across the borderland, the threshold will not seem so daunting. His jaw moves, clenches, swallows his saliva in a harsh lump.

His fingers flex, and he breathes out. The air is heavy, and sits on his shoulders as a great weight. He contemplates, even as he steps forward, that he might be able to go back to Jack, proclaim Abigail lost, and that they will have to use human means to find her. Humans are perceptive, and resourceful, and surely they would find her eventually. Bone, or body.

But Jack doesn't like that option. Never has.

So, Will steps, and steps again, each one carrying a hesitation before it lands, as though timed to a waltz. He walks, limping, as his shoulders seem to get heavier, his chest leaden and weighted from the bottom of his heart as though something has hung metal from it, and with each foot of ground he gains, another weight is added.

There is no path, in the darkness, and while there must be trees, and rocks, and hillsides, landscapes to create the illusion of life and the movement of tectonic plates, Will does not stumble over errant roots and rocks. He walks through neither grass nor leaves. The ground is barren.

He stops, pausing, and clicks his tongue, working his jaw. Often little creatures are drawn by the sound of his voice.

Indeed, one comes. Will only sees it because it is white, and shines from the leftover glow of the less-dark place. It appears cat-like, a little errant shot of moonlight, and Will smiles, crouching down as its purr fills the air, and it rumbles and rubs its cheek against his knee.

"Little one," he murmurs, cupping its face. The cat-creature – for it is not a cat, it is too small, and not quite fur-soft, but sleek like the pelt of a short-haired rabbit, and its tail does not flick and twist, but curls over its back and ends in a scorpion-sting point. Its feet are not paws, but splay out like talons of an eagle, meant to grab, to rip and tear.

Its eyes glow, brilliantly yellow, wide-pupiled in pleasure as Will pets it. "Are you a friend of mine?" he asks.

The cat-creature purrs, more loudly, and turns to rub its forehead into Will's palm. Its tail flexes, and falls back, so that the sting of it is in no danger of striking Will. Though Will does not doubt for a second that, should he misstep, he will be attacked and harmed.

Will smiles, and puts his free hand into the bag around his neck, pulling out a small piece of jerky. The Fey like meat. The cat blinks, lets out a soft sound of acceptance and pride, 'Mrrp', and delicately parts its jaws, tongue of a snake curling around the meat and pulling it into its mouth.

Will nods to himself, glad that he's earned the creature's favor, and he stands, and takes off his shoes. The creature stares at him, unblinking, golden-white and shining in the darkness. Around it, its eyes reveal barren soil, hard-caked as though baked under desert sun.

"Will you guard my shoes for me?" he asks it, setting them to one side. "I shouldn't be gone long."

The cat blinks at him, once, and parts its mouth with another soft hiss.

Will smiles. "Fair enough," he says. "One bite for each shoe." He kneels down again and takes out another piece, lets the creature eat from his hand. The cat purrs, tail flicking in apparent satisfaction, and then climbs into his shoes, forelegs in one, hindlegs in the other. Its tail curls around it, the bulbous end providing a pillow for its cheek, and it settles, purring loudly, eyes wide and fixed ahead.

"Thank you, my friend," he tells it, and the cat-creature blinks, purring again and huffing. "I will whistle, when I return, so you know it's me."

The creature's eyes blink once, slowly, a lazy kiss in acceptance of that, and Will turns, and continues on in the direction the cat's eyes had pointed. Barefoot, he makes no sound, expects

to stub his toe or step onto prickle-vines or upturned grass, roots, logs. But he doesn't. The desert stretches out, and he wishes he had a light, if only to confirm if the trees are truly parting for him, eager to wrap him in their limbs and drown him in their love.

Onward, he marches, until he cannot count his steps anymore, and yet when he looks back, he sees the pinprick-gold of the cat's eyes, watching him, waiting. They appear as a lighthouse in the distance, a reminder of shores, calling him home, and he lets his shoulders slacken, tries to relax, as he turns his gaze away and keeps walking.

He understands, dimly, that he is not alone. No one is alone, in the aether. He is surely being watched, studied, as a butterfly in a shadow box, a jungle cat in a cage. And so, he paces, pants, and though the air in the aether is neither hot nor cold, he begins to sweat as the weight in his chest grows, drives him downward, to his hands and knees – further, to his belly, until he can barely crawl.

When it feels like he cannot go any further, and the ground will surely cave under his weight and swallow him, he feels a slight change below him, between his fingers and under his knees. Where there was dry-trodden and cracked dirt, he feels the sweet tendrils of grass. Where there was flatness, divots and rises. Like woodland paths, and he gasps, renewed from the hips and stomach, and pushes himself onward. He slithers, snake-like, and then the ground abruptly gives, and he dives down, rolling into a place full of grass and flowers.

Like stepping through a doorway, the world explodes in sunlight. It is glittering, as though the sun-cat is looking down upon him with both eyes, and Will laughs, feeling suddenly light and airy. Buoyant. As if he could float away.

He rolls onto his back, blinks his eyes open, and could weep for what he sees. Trees circle a small glade, rising up like tempestuous lords of judgement, their branches stern and crawling inwards, marring the brilliant blue of the sky. Cherry blossoms, orange, pearling flowers that Will cannot name, pink roses and white lilies encircle the glade and cover the trees. They have no leaves, only flowers, and the trunks of them are opalescent and gleaming like the shine of exposed bone. The grass itself is green, wonderfully green, vibrant and alive and Will wants to run his face through it, wants to bury himself in the lush grass, and the welcoming piles of poppies and buttercups that sprout up under his hands and feet.

He sits up, and in the middle of the glade, he sees a darkness. It is a tree stump, mushrooms growing thick and wide around the base of it, and has been worn to appear as steps, up to a throne-like dip in the trunk where one might sit. Though the sun-cat gazes down upon the glade with all its brightness, the tree stump appears as anti-matter, absorbing the sunlight, blacker than black.

Will swallows, and stands, absently tugging the pull of the poppies from his hands. They sting him, raise little red welts on his fingers and palms, and the buttercups and blossoms fall from his feet as he walks towards the tree stump. Though it is foreboding, and dark, it is beautiful, and pulls Will towards it like a fish on a hook.

He stops, shy of the mushrooms. He is sure this is where he's meant to have gone, for the aether drags mortals where they want to go but only if, in their heart, they are sure of it. At any point, Will could have turned back, or turned full-circle and been left to wander, but time

and practice has honed his sense of direction, and where he wants to go, he will go, as long as his force of will remains strong.

But there is no one here. Will looks up at the sun-cat, finds it staring with both eyes, golden-orange. He smiles at it, and waves, and the cat blinks at him, momentarily casting the glade into darkness.

Will shivers, and senses something other here. But when the sun-cat opens its eyes, he is alone.

He looks around him, tense in the shoulders, in his gut. There are eyes on him, somewhere. The sun-cat blinks again, and Will sees gold. He shivers, and sits, his hands in the grass as the poppies and lilies encase his fingers, spread up his wrists. Thick daisy chains and buttercups surround his feet, and he feels lax, slow-blinking. He tilts his head up, closes his eyes, hearing movement, whisper-soft, like a sigh.

"Will you let me see you?" he asks of the nameless presence, for he is sure this is who he's meant to see.

A laugh comes, then, too-close. Will flinches, tenses, works his jaw to one side to feel the grit of his teeth. He keeps his eyes closed.

"No," comes the reply. "Not for now, traveler. What brings you here?" The voice is soft, musical in the way most Fey speak, as though the speaker is reading aloud a poem or a song. There's a cadence to it, a rhythm both hypnotic and alluring. Will breathes deep, smells not the flowers, but something headier; the iron of blood, the sound of a pulsing heart.

The sun-cat opens its eyes as Will does, and Will swallows, letting out a quiet whine when he still sees nothing. No indication of his companion except a soft dip in the grass.

Then, his head turns, and as the sun-cat blinks, he sees golden eyes from atop the throne. The creature is tall, and Will must crane his head to meet its eyes. They flicker as though embers, red and gold mixing together amidst the black.

The creature sits forward, and in the darkness Will's eyes adjust, keenly sensitive to the differences in black. He can make out slim shoulders, long arms, wickedly-curved claws for hands. Most dark Fey are frightening like this. The creature smiles, and its teeth glow like it holds fire in its mouth, and exposes sharp fangs, vampiric. Carnivorous.

It slides down from its perch, so close to Will, and then the sun-cat opens its eyes and it is gone. Will trembles, knowing that the next time the sun-cat blinks, he will surely be face to face with the creature. He pulls his hands from the grass, from the flowers. He is still so light, and without their anchor, is in danger of floating away.

Then, a purr, close as air, as breath. Will feels a touch on his face, the subtle point of a claw, and he shivers, tries not to flinch. Works his tongue behind his teeth and presses to feel the flesh of his gums. "What brings you here, traveler?" comes the question again.

Will breathes in. Information is currency, and he would do well not to sell himself short. "What is your name?" he asks.

The air darkens with another blink, and Will is suddenly too close to the creature. It crouches in front of him, legs like a goat, curving back then forward again to a pair of large, flat feet, similarly sharp with claws. It is deceptively frail-looking, and bears a mane of thick feathers like Will's stag, down its back and around its neck. It has horns, that jut up so high they become tree branches, and melt into the darker-black.

It is smiling, sharp and wide, and its eyes glow and do not have pupils. Will meets its gaze as steady as he can, cannot allow his prey-animal heart to gallop away in fear. Cannot afford his hands to shake. He breathes deeply, tasting blood, tasting ash.

"I have many names," the creature purrs. "You may call me Hannibal, sweet boy." The hand withdraws from Will's face, and Hannibal holds it out. Though Fey do not subscribe to human gender, the name and the voice sound masculine, and so Will assigns it as a 'he' in his mind, for easiness' sake. Hannibal curls his fingers, ready to accept an offering. "And yours?"

Will smiles. He knows this trick, for it is as old as time. "I will not give you my name," he replies, and Hannibal's smile widens, purring as though pleased and proud. "But you may call me Will."

"Will," Hannibal repeats, like he's singing the name. It pulls at Will's chest, gathers there as embers and heat, ready to be fanned, to be set aflame. Will has never met a faerie that has so drawn him in. The sun-cat doesn't return – it is keeping its eyes closed, so Will can see, and in the darkness, Will's vision is clearing. The blossoms and flowers glow like they covet the sunlight, hold onto it and radiate it out in technicolor and black light.

Hannibal shifts his weight, sits to mimic Will, cross-legged. He has his hand still held out and Will trembles, wants to take it, wants to let Hannibal pull him in. Refuses, jerks his jaw and fights the reins.

"And what brings you to me, Will?" he asks.

Will licks his lips, rolls his shoulders, tries to settle the wild pound-pound-dip of his heart. "A friend told me to find you," he says. "I'm looking for someone. Can you help me?"

"Whether I can or cannot is not the question," Hannibal replies in a purr, his voice so soft, coaxing, like he's offering food to a starving, abused animal. Will feels slaughtered, gutted, shaking, as he stares into Hannibal's eyes. Normally he would shirk from such contact, but Hannibal holds him, clawed and quiet and so, so bright. "You use words carefully. Do you often navigate within my kind so easily?"

"A question for a question," Will murmurs. "If you help me, I can offer you things."

Hannibal huffs, grinning wide. "Trinkets and gifts? I have no need for those."

Will swallows, lowers his eyes. "I know that. I know what you want."

"And what is it that you imagine I want?"

Will looks around, to the otherworldly darkness, the empty glade. Though Hannibal is surely not the only creature in the dark, he is alone.

He clicks his tongue, squares his jaw. Through his years, he has become a master of reading what people want, and though the Fey are tricky and do not think like humans, he is sure that he can read Hannibal just as easily. "Companionship," he murmurs.

Hannibal's eyes flash, and his head tilts, and he lets out a pleased-sounding hum. His lips come together to do it, hiding his teeth, but then they return when he smiles.

"If you help me," Will continues, incensed, emboldened; "I can give you time amongst the mortal. But you must help me first."

"Quid pro quo," Hannibal purrs. His words come with a hiss, a flutter of his tongue that slides cold iron down Will's spine. "And what, sweet boy, do you need help with?"

Will swallows. "I'm looking for a girl," he says. "She's been taken, hidden away by her father. He's a dark creature, and has remained hidden from human sight. The time I have to find her is short."

Hannibal hums, considering this. In his silence, flowers grow, encasing Will's knees, his thighs, like the press of a lover's hands.

"I can help you find this girl," Hannibal finally says, and Will breathes out, relieved beyond measure. He flinches, shaking when he feels Hannibal's hands touch his own, cradle his wrists in his claws. "But I will not do this for free. I require a gift, of good faith, to cement our contract."

"And what is it that you want?" Will breathes.

Hannibal's smile widens, and the angle of his mouth changes as his head tilts. "For now?" he whispers, and Will nods. "A kiss. I wish to taste you." Will shivers, biting his lower lip. "Just on the cheek, sweet traveler. For now."

A kiss for the Fey is binding, and will lock in Hannibal's favor and his help. Will cannot afford to refuse, and indeed, his heart steadies, and his spine warms when he considers that Hannibal is not demanding his mouth. Just a cheek. He can give that small part of himself over, for the hunt.

"And after?" he asks.

"After, when the girl is safe, you will return to me, and bring me to your world. Twenty-four hours." Hannibal smiles. "And, perhaps, if my service suits you, you will think of me again, should you find yourself in need of further help."

Will presses his lips together, fingers curling. "Do you require a body?" he asks, for it's important to know this now. He will need to bring a vessel, if Hannibal demands it.

Hannibal laughs. "No, my dear," he purrs. His hands slide up Will's forearms, claws sharp and digging to raise red lines. He leans forward, cups Will's throat, his jaw, his face. His hands are burning, blister-hot, and Will is shaking, sweat beading along his brow.

He nods, swallowing harshly. "Alright," he whispers. "You may kiss me on the cheek."

Hannibal smiles, purring gently, and leans in. His hands find Will's neck, cradle him, and Will closes his eyes as the fire in Hannibal's mouth dies. He feels the creature's lips, brushing gently against the ridge of his cheekbone, and Hannibal kisses him there, where his blush rushes to the surface. It's warm, warm as fire, warm as fresh blood, and Will trembles in his hold, hands flexing on his thighs. He breathes out, lips parting, the weight of Fey magic glistening on his sweaty forehead, sinking into his shoulders, his spine, his gut.

He whimpers when Hannibal withdraws, and the creature lets go of his throat, brushes his hands down Will's shaking arms, to his hands. Where he touches, flowers die. He cradles Will's hands again, as though to feel the rush of Will's blood, the pounding behind his eyes.

Then, Hannibal speaks. "Go to the mountains," he murmurs. Will frowns, wants to ask which ones, but he knows, he knows like a deep-etched line in his heart, cracking his lungs. "To the cabin of this father. Beneath the floor there is a map, a lead to a safehouse. He has taken his daughter there."

Will swallows, nods, opens his eyes to see Hannibal's brilliant golden-red, the fire in his mouth. "Is she still alive?" he asks.

Hannibal grins, wide. "For that information, sweet one, I will require another kiss."

Will blinks, steady-slow, once. He swallows, feels heat on the back of his neck. "The other cheek?" he asks, though he knows the answer.

Hannibal shakes his head, brushes one claw feather-light over Will's bottom lip. "Here," he murmurs. Will's gut clenches at the word, and he wonders how it's affecting him so, Hannibal's magic and the weight of the world sliding from his shoulders, curling and purring underneath his heart.

Will knows Jack will ask. He knows he will find out, eventually.

And yet.

"I accept," he whispers.

Hannibal smiles, blinking slowly back at him, and leans in again. His claws spread out over Will's hands, and vines grow there, thick and thorny, and Will tilts his head, closes his eyes and leans in as Hannibal kisses him. His lips are soft, burning, and Will feels branded to the core, marked by Hannibal's magic. The rest of the world will surely see it – a black blister-bruise of love and desire, of a binding contract, marking him in the aether as one of Hannibal's own.

The kiss is short, and chaste. No tongue, no teeth. Will gasps when Hannibal withdraws, purring and proud, and his eyes are wet, his mouth is wet. He's salivating, hungry. Time moves differently in the aether, and Will wants, for the first time, to remain here. To be kissed again.

He licks his lips, finds the flesh not charred, but tingling, alive with sensation. "Well?" he asks, weak.

"She is alive," Hannibal whispers in answer. His hands move and Will's ache to follow, to catch the slide of them on his thighs, his knees, then away. It's glamor, lust, wayward and without direction. Will bares his teeth, fighting the urge to hunt for more. "Now, dear one, you must go. I eagerly await your return."

Then, the sun-cat opens its eyes, and Will gasps, blinded from the darkness of the glade as he is once again wrapped in brilliant color. He stands, pulling the vines and flowers from his flesh, where they have dug in like claws to his clothes, eager to rend, to rip, to tear him apart.

He looks to the sun-cat, blinking in thanks, and shakes himself off. He has what he came here for, and, heavy with knowledge that he will soon return, he starts up the small hill, back through the bone trees, into the heavy embrace of the darkness.

He finds the cat-creature, still unblinking, and whistles to it, petting its head in thanks for guarding his shoes. It's easier to navigate the aether barefoot. The creature purrs at him, tail flicking in pleasure, and Will gives it another bite of jerky and dons his socks and shoes again, heading back towards the teal-light of the not-so-dark. The cat-creature follows him, but slinks away once the two silver trees come into view.

His informant is there, and grins at him. "Did you find what you were looking for?" it asks.

"Yes. Thank you," Will replies, nodding.

"Good luck, friend," it says, and disappears from sight. Will follows his path of flowers, pulling sage-ash from his bag and sprinkling it behind him in his wake, so the flowers die. His stag is where he left it, on the other side of the signpost, and snorts at him, ears back, like it can see the silvery line of Hannibal's kisses on his cheek, on his lips.

Will smiles at it, enveloped in the light of the friendly forest, and starts back towards the house. His stag follows.

Chapter 3

There is an 'O' on his door, in the bottom left space, stopping his 'X's forming a diagonal line of three. Will smiles when he sees, below the tic-tac-toe board, a small frowning face the size of his palm. He has never seen the creature that plays this game with him, but he knows that it is vaguely female, and appears as a child-like sprite. She is very, very interested in getting into his basement, and Will suspects that she is carnivorous, and would try to consume him in his most vulnerable state.

So he made a deal with her; when she wins a game, she can go downstairs. When she wins three in a row, she can sit with him for a while, until he comes back to reclaim his body, as long as she doesn't try to cross the boundary of the iron ring. The little bat-creatures could soothe her hunger, if she desired.

If she wins five games in a row, well.

Will opens the door to the basement. The way the board is set up, he will definitely win – either with a line down the right-hand column, or across the center, horizontally. She lost this time – she has always lost. Will has the advantage of going first, since he is the one who starts the game before entering the aether.

He trots downstairs, sees the creatures skitter and scurry in light colored teal and lavender. They are still counting the salt granules, though one of them hisses and bares tiny, sharp teeth at him as he passes. He thinks of bringing one of them to the cat who guarded his shoes. He has never seen these creatures in the forest – they gather where there is life, where the heart beats steady and strong.

He enters the ring, and lays down along the silhouette of his body. Closes his eyes and takes in a deep breath. Then another, without letting out the first, until his lungs are full of the damp air, breathing through wet towels, waterboarded back to the mortal plane. Another breath, another, heavier and lighter all at once. His shoulders and chest weigh heavy as though paralyzed, his brain no longer doing things as a given, but forced to. He must make himself breathe. He must make his heart beat, his blood rush.

He hears Winston bark, and the sound is so sudden and startling – always startling, no matter how many times he does this – and he surges upright, gasping for breath, slick to the core and trembling. Winston stands behind him, tail wagging in relief at seeing his master return, and his nose presses to Will's shoulder, though he does not cross the ring.

Will shivers, turns his head and his body, takes his dog and wraps his fingers through Winston's thick scruff, clinging to him. Until the sharpness of his teeth recede, and the gold behind his eyes fades away. Winston is panting, not too fast, just there, tongue lapping gently at Will's sweaty chin. Will, at first, doesn't even think to bat him away. It's soothing, to feel such an animal, alive and warm, soft and steady. Winston is a strong dog, a good dog.

He sighs, rests his forehead to Winston's, and lets him go. "Good boy," he murmurs, and unties the bag from around his neck, re-affixing it to Winston's collar, and then stands. His

face is tacky with sweat and his lungs feel too-dry after the wet touch of the aether. His stomach is rumbling, demanding and sharply reminding him of his terrible diet.

He leaves the ring, throws more salt on the ground as entertainment, and seals it shut. Clicks his tongue, and lets Winston lead him upstairs. Though he's weak, he moves with assuredness and steadiness, for the creatures in the aether are always watching, and he cannot allow himself to be vulnerable when their eyes glow and their teeth shine sharp.

He leaves the basement, seals it, and opens the freshest can of red paint. He paints over the game board so that, when he returns, he can begin anew. The dogs know better than to lick at the door, and he was vicious and stern with his training of them so that they won't investigate even when he isn't here to watch them.

He closes the paint lid and takes the brush to wash it. While his sink fills and he lets it soak, sprinkling more salt into the water, he starts his coffee machine and opens the fridge. To call the contents anything less than pitiful would be generous, but there is at least a jar of grape jelly, half-used, which he takes out. He opens the jar and sets it down, absently letting Winston lick the sticky remnants from his fingers, and reaches for his bread.

He frowns at it. The exposed piece has a tiny patch of white-green mold on it. He checks the date.

He bought this recently.

Frown deepening, Will goes to the front room, where his coat is. The rest of his dogs are inside and the door is shut, and he takes his phone from his coat, gritting his teeth and forcing them not to grind, to powder and dust. He does this when he's anxious.

He checks the date on his phone, dropping his coat back in a haphazard pile on the floor.

There are several missed calls and texts on his phone. From Jack, from Alana. Varying in tone and mania, but with the same general theme; "Are you alright? Can I get an update? Will, call me. Are you alright?"

But that is not the most troubling thing.

He has spent no less than four mortal calendar days in the aether.

No wonder he's starving.

He throws his phone down, panicked at the knowledge. Time passes differently in the aether, he knows that, but he has never spent so long within it. The dark part of the forest must bend time even further – Will should be careful. If he had been gone too much longer, he might have perished in his basement, rotted away to nothingness.

He thinks of Hannibal, how he had insisted Will leave. Perhaps he had known.

He rushes to his kitchen, and it's like his body catches up to him all at once, now that his brain has registered the difference. He fills a cup with water and drinks it, wincing at the lukewarm, irony taste of old pipes. Fills and drinks again, until his stomach clenches in

protest. He opens the bread and tears the moldy part away, eating the rest. Then the next piece, doing the same. The third has been spared, the mold hasn't gotten that deep, and he rolls it and jams it into the jelly, tilts it until a huge dollop comes out with it and eats it in three bites, one thick glob falling onto the floor and being dutifully licked up by Winston.

Will has enchanted his house to open and shut when the dogs need letting out, and their food bowls fill automatically when Will is in the aether, or away on a case – not that Jack takes him on cases all that much, but it's an eventuality he has planned for. So he is not worried for their care. Had he been gone too long, he's sure Alana or Jack would have come here, taken them in, made sure they were cared for.

He swallows another piece of bread, wincing at the hard ball of heartburn in his chest. He presses his hand to his chest, bows over the sink painted pink-water with the red brush inside it, looks as the salt granules sizzle and dissolve. He sinks his hand into the water, shivers as his arm pebbles with goose bumps, his fingers curl around the handle.

Hears, faintly, Hannibal's purr, feels the heat in his chest expand and grow claws. He closes his eyes and sees gold blinking back at him, red teeth. Feels his kiss.

The bargains he strikes in the aether follow him, when he leaves it, if they are incomplete. The weight of the girl's games are things he is only free from when not in his house. Now, Hannibal's deal looms over him like storm clouds, blocking out the sun-cat's warm gaze.

He looks up, peers out of the window above the sink, to the open fields and the line of trees that mark the edge of his property. The single road that splits the boundaries. There are eyes on him, claws at his neck, something so heavy in his heart, weighing him down. He wants to sink into the water, to breathe it in.

Winston barks, and nudges his thigh, startling Will out of his thoughts so suddenly that he flinches, recoiling and splashing water onto the dog's head. Winston looks at him, and if he were personified Will would call that look exasperated, and licks his nose.

Will swallows, and runs his hands through his hair, damp one slicking his hair back and making it stick to his head and neck. He offers Winston a smile and Winston barks, tail wagging, and jumps again as his phone starts ringing.

He takes another slice of bread, rolling it up to eat it as he goes back to his phone. Jack's name flashes across the screen and he winces, sitting down in an effort to calm his rolling stomach and tight shoulders, and answers.

"Jack," he says.

"Will." Jack's voice is a snarl, equal parts relief and aggravation. "Finally. Where the Hell have you been?"

"I'm sorry," Will says, rubbing his eyes with the meat of his thumb. His dogs stir, noticing his presence, finally, and several of them get up and congregate around his feet, chins on his thighs or soft flanks pressed to his ankles. "I had to go dark for a while. Time moves differently there, you know that."

Jack grunts. "Did you find anything out?" he asks. Jack has always been supremely uncomfortable with the idea of the aether – the idea that there is a world, laying over theirs, through which spirits and demons move and manifest themselves in different ways. Where the border lies thin, people can cross, just as Will does in his house, though it's usually one-way. Fey to mortal. Never the other way around.

Will nods, though Jack can't see him. Sets his teeth on edge and swallows, clears his throat. "We need to go back to Hobbs' cabin," he says. "Under the floor, there is a map. A safehouse. I was told his pup is there."

"Is she alive?" Jack asks, as Will knew he would. Will winces, sets the bread down and touches his lips, feels the heat of Hannibal's kiss, there. How far into his journey had that been? Day one? Day three? How can his mouth still burn, his chest still ache, seeking more?

Still, he swallows, and says; "Yes," very softly. Jack's answer is a relieved breath, and Will stands, and throws the bread to his dogs, watches Buster and Addy scramble for it and watches as Winston wins the prize, nabbing it with a delicate snap of his jaws. He smiles, and kneels down, petting his pack as they circle him, giving him their warmth and strength.

"Good," Jack says. "I'll call the P.D. in Minnesota. They'll find it."

"I want to be there," Will murmurs.

Jack pauses. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Will says. He stands again, using Addy's shoulder as support, and goes to his front door. He steps outside, shivering in the crisp, cold air. His car sits, undisturbed. It rained while he was in the aether, and the bumper and hood shines with it. Next to it, he sees his stag, ears cocked forward and head raised in readiness. "I have to see her. It's important, Jack."

Jack grunts again. "Alright. Be at the airport in two hours. We'll fly there together."

Will nods, and hangs up the phone.

He freezes. There are eyes on him, somewhere. He lifts his head, tilts it, frowns when he sees a plume of exhaust and the low orange of headlights as a car turns, emerges from the road that feeds into his own. He blinks, lips twitching when he recognizes Alana's car.

He looks up, sees the sun-cat winking at him. In the shade of the clouds, he shivers, half-expecting Hannibal to appear in the darkness. But he doesn't, because he can't. Not yet.

Alana pulls up behind his car and the stag snorts, heavily, flanks heaving as it turns to look at her. She kills the engine and gets out of the car and Will's dogs come rushing out in greeting. She is smiling, laughing as they run to her and jump up, scattering around her in recognition. She has been to his house a few times, cared for his dogs before she learned that she doesn't need to – yet still does, Will suspects, when he's out of town.

"They need socialization," she had said. "Just like everyone else."

Will tilts his head as she approaches him. She has a plastic bag in her hand and the scents of take-out Chinese food reach him. His stomach kicks him in impatience, like a shying horse, and he leans into her, accepts her hand on his shoulder, and smiles as she passes him and goes inside.

"Good to see you up and about," she says, and sits at the table. Will follows her, the door remaining open, as it will until all the dogs are inside. Her shoulders roll and tense, as he's sure she feels the strange effects of magic as she enters his house.

He sits with her, lets her unpack the food and hand him a box of egg fried rice and a plastic fork. He opens it and starts to eat. Lets her sit, and stew, and watch him.

She sighs. "I was worried about you, Will," she says.

Will hums, licks his lips. "You shouldn't have come here," he replies, and he doesn't mean it as a scold. "If I had still been hunting, you could be in danger. You could have put me in danger."

She frowns, sucks in a breath like she wants to argue, but relents, and nods, face smoothing out in understanding. "I'm sorry," she says, and Will accepts it with a nod. "I just – you weren't answering your phone, and I asked Jack and he said you'd never been gone for so long before."

Will hesitates. Thinks about telling her. Decides; "I had to go deeper than usual," he murmurs. "Darker things require darker answers."

She frowns, concern coloring her eyes like stained glass windows of ocean and skies. "Is it safe?"

Will laughs. What a ridiculous question. "Of course not," he replies. He eats more of the rice, devouring it desperately until his stomach aches sharply, too-full, yet he keeps eating, consuming the calories eagerly like the starving man he is.

She watches him for a long while, her own food mostly untouched. She swallows, and then says; "Do you ever talk to people, about what you see in that place?"

"The aether," he tells her. She should learn the name, at least.

She nods. "The aether, then," she says.

Will huffs, shaking his head. "No," he replies. "Most people don't even believe in it. The people that do barely scratch the surface of communing with the Fey. And I…" He stops, clears his throat, rolls his shoulders and lifts his feet so only his toes touch the ground. "In Louisiana, there were people who moved between the realms like I do. Where the blood is old, and the magic is strong. But no one does it like I can, up here."

He lifts one shoulder, fixes her with a smile toothy and off-kilter. "So, Alana, who would I talk to about it?"

She makes a quiet, uncertain sound, brow creasing, eyes turning ocean-dark. "I don't know," she confesses. "But someone. I feel like you should talk to someone."

Will smiles. "People like you suggest things when they already have an answer," he says lowly. Wonders, absently, if she can see the brand of Fey touch on his cheek, on his mouth. If his flesh has turned silver, scarred and marked as one of the monster's own. "I don't want to be rude, but I have to be at the airport in two hours. I'm flying out with Jack to the Hobbs cabin."

Her eyes widen, and she straightens up. "Why?"

"I know where the girl is," he tells her. "Or, at least, I know how to find her. I want to be the one that finds her."

She hums, swallowing harshly, and finally takes a bite of her food. "Is there a way you can…" She winces, like she knows what she's about to say will come across as insulting, or clumsy. "Can you cast…some kind of enchantment? Or spell or something? That, I don't know, lets me know if you're in danger, or if you're still safe?"

Will blinks, tilts his head at her.

"So I don't worry," she finishes.

He presses his lips together, and considers it. "Maybe," he says, slowly, thinking. It would be some kind of tracking spell – he's used plenty of those. But it would have to take into account physical issues, not location. And he would have to make the thresholds very forgiving, so that if he were to disappear for four or five days at a time, dehydration would not trigger the alarm.

He stands, and holds out his hand. "Give me your phone."

She blinks, and hands it to him.

He takes it, and goes to his bedroom, kneeling down to reach for the box of crystals and stones he keeps as offerings for his informants. Beneath it all is parchment, and a piece of charcoal, and bundles of sage. He takes a piece of agate, which is a good stone for when auras are out of balance, and in need of grounding, and returns downstairs.

"I don't have time to do this properly," he says. "But take this." He hands her phone and the stone back to her, and she takes it, brow furrowed in confusion. "Touch it as often as you can during the day, and when you do, think of me. Worry for me. Then, at night, keep it on top of your phone with my name pulled up."

She licks her lips, and Will can tell she's skeptical, but that's alright. As long as she is obedient.

"When I return from Minnesota, the energy in the stone will allow me to cast the spell, and if I do it right, you'll get updates on your phone as to my physical and mental wellbeing." He

pauses, considering, and adds; "I'll put it at a percentage mark. If it drops below, say, twenty, then something's wrong."

"Twenty percent?" she repeats, eyes wide. "That can't…that's not – what would that even mean?"

Will smiles. "It will likely mean I can't stand on my own, and that I'll be borderline malnourished and dehydrated. I'll have to figure out the details."

She nods.

"Alana," he says, and reaches for her, takes both her shoulders in his hands and makes sure she meets his eyes. "I want to make this very, *very* clear. You cannot come here without invitation. It's dangerous. There are things in the aether drawn to living creatures and they *will* come for you, and they will attack you, if you're not protected."

She shivers, but nods, and he lets her go.

"Will." She reaches out, catches his wrist, fingers wrapping gentle and firm around his exposed skin. He shivers, fingers curling, and looks to her, settles his eyes somewhere on her jaw. "Can you – can you teach me, then? Teach me how to protect myself?"

Will frowns, considers it. It would be smart, for her to learn. "That still doesn't mean you'll be safe," he warns her.

"I know," she says, and offers him a kind, hopeful smile. "But if it'll help you, and it'll help me, I'd like to learn. I want to understand."

"Are you the person you think I should talk to, about what I see and do in the aether?" he asks.

She shakes her head. "Not me, per se," she replies. "At least, I didn't have myself in mind. But if you're willing to share, I'm willing to listen."

Will licks his lips, and pulls his hand away. He runs his hands through his hair, rolls his shoulders, skitters to his chair, then back, and sucks in another breath. Looks to her, sees her looking at him with that same wary confusion, like he's speaking a language she only half-knows.

"I'll think about it," he murmurs.

She smiles, and nods, then stands and begins to pack her food away. She leaves the rice for Will, and another plastic container of what looks like sweet and sour pork, with a sealed bowl of off-orange sauce. "Alright," she says. "Well, good luck with finding the girl. Please let me know when you get back."

Will bites his lower lip. "I have to go to the aether when I come back," he says. "I…owe someone a favor."

She looks at him, her eyes dark with concern. But she swallows back her protest and forces a weak smile. "Okay," she replies gently. "Whenever you're free, then. Just promise me you'll check in? I care about you, Will, and what you do worries me."

"People fear what they don't understand," Will says lightly. It's not a judgement, just a statement of fact.

She huffs, cheeks coloring in offense, but shrugs it off. Will knows he's not the most personable of friends. She puts her food back into the bag, knots the handles and threads her fingers through.

"Thanks for the food," Will offers, both as apology and genuine thanks, as he walks her to the open door.

"Any time," she replies warmly. She touches his shoulder again, squeezing, and then walks to her car. The sun-cat gazes down, lights her hair and the gem-blue of her dress. Will watches her go, and grins as his stag nudges her shoulder as she passes. She moves through its muzzle like it is a ghost, like it is smoke.

Will rolls his shoulders, whistles for his dogs, and goes back inside. The door closes behind them. Will puts the food in his fridge and heads upstairs, showers and dresses quickly, and throws what hopefully will resemble passable sets of outfits into a suitcase without checking if anything matches or if he has packed the same amount of shirts as pants, as pairs of underwear, as socks. He brushes his teeth and packs his toothbrush and deodorant, then his box of crystals and herbs, just in case. Jack always gives him crap for bringing stuff like that, but if Hobbs is marked by one of the aether-folk, it would be good to take.

He leaves, and gets into his car. His stag perks up, snorting as the engine rumbles to life, and he turns his vehicle and starts towards the airport. The sun-cat watches him, clouds closing its eyes in a kiss, and it feels like he's being wished good luck and good fortune.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Please check out the art by plaguebruises in my fey!hannibal tag! :D

They find Abigail Hobbs. She is just where Hannibal said she would be – a rotten plank in the floor had come up, revealing a store of ammo, emergency rations that Jack said reminded him of MREs, and a map so creased and crumbling it looked like it had been folded and refolded every day for the last sixteen years.

They find her, in a homestead in the mountains. They find her pale, wide-eyed, with a healing scar around her neck. They find her dehydrated, chap-lipped, her skin blistered and windswept, nails clogged with dirt. They find her barely awake.

They find her alive.

They do not find Hobbs. Will kneels down by the stairs of the ramshackle building, presses his nose to the ground and breathes in, deeply. He gathers the soil, cups it around his mouth until he cannot breathe real air anymore, until it gathers to his glasses and clings to his beard. Thinks, if he were to dig in with claws and teeth, he might prowl through to the roots and see, see the glimmering golden trail of Hobbs' life.

He hears, nearby, the heavy snort of an animal. Will frowns, lifting to his elbows, to his wrists, to his hands. Arches his back as the sun-cat rolls and purrs to his shoulders. He stands, shoulders up, rolling – head, pupils, fingers flexing. Licks his lips and tastes damp dirt.

The air moves, and curls around his neck like a hand, and pulls him towards the trees. He reaches out, brushing soft fingers to the bark of one. There is magic, here. Something old and powerful. He should lay a mark, start a game, so that he does not get lost and does not inadvertently forfeit his soul.

He touches his lips, still feeling Hannibal's against them. No, he will not be taken. Not today, at least.

He walks forward. If anyone calls for him, he does not hear them. Instead, he touches trees that stand as tall monuments to nature's endurance. He feels the wind play idly with his hair, lets her tickle and tease his neck, bite at his ears. He lifts his head, tilts it, when he hears a short, heavy puff of breath.

It is a stag, much like his own, but this one is white and looks at Will with eyes the color of sunlit sky. Its horns glisten as rose quartz, shine like diamond, and Will tilts his head the other way as it regards him. It flicks its tail, eyes flashing, lifts a foreleg, and its hoof is bloody.

"See?" Will whispers, and does not know why he does it. He lifts his eyes and meets the stag's. "I see."

He approaches the stag, shrugs off his plaid-patterned overshirt and tears it, nails in the chest pocket, down in a quick strip. He wraps it around the stag's bleeding hoof and ties it tight. The stag puffs, and noses at his shoulder, and sets its foot down.

Will reaches up, touches the stag's cheek. Kisses, gently, the bridge of its muzzle, where the skin has no hair and is velvety and smooth. "Show me?"

The stag snorts again, and begins to walk. Will follows, one hand buried thick in the hair at the withers. The sky grows dark, the great, fathomless maw of nighttime spreading out as the sun-cat yawns, and blinks, and allows its cousin to take over.

They walk, and walk, until Will spots motion. He freezes, and looks up at the stag, and its eyes are forward, its ears are forward. There is blood coming from its nostrils. Will dabs at it with the shredded remains of his shirt, and then turns his head towards the movement. Something black and prowling is there, something with eyes that glow a myriad of colors, a back that is at once horned and smooth, scaled and feathered. It is a creature that does not know what it is.

Will balls his fist in his bloodied, torn shirt, shields his knuckles in case the creature's blood burns. He steps forward, through undergrowth and glowing flowers, and the thing flinches from him, hissing. It is an amorphous blob of a thing, without limbs, without bones. Spineless and gutless and Will tilts his head.

"Mercy," the thing hisses.

"Mercy," Will replies. He takes his gun from the back of his jeans, holds it steady, and shoots. Two, in each eye. Three in the chest. He throws his gun down and takes off his glasses and it is Hobbs, nose bloody, foot bloody. Will's gun planted seven bullets in his chest, in a ring around his heart.

Bullseye.

Will lifts his head, and the lights of the aether flood his iris, turn them to pinpricks. The stag heaves, bloodied, and Will thinks it strange that Hobbs is more human in this world than in the one normal men navigate.

He smiles. "See?" he tells the stag. "He never belonged with the likes of us."

Will emerges to Jack's tirade. Blustering, wound up like a baited bear, Jack's cheeks are purpled and his eyes black with anger. Will's head tilts, his eyes scan the building and the flat grass around it, heavily pressed by booted feet. There is only torn trails of yellow police tape and tire tracks, and he frowns.

"Where is everyone?" he asks.

"Where is everyone?" Jack repeats, voice a thunderous crash of ocean waves and rocks hitting cliffs. Will tilts his head up, shields his eyes, sees that the sun-cat is gazing down at him, wispy clouds a tail-flick of absent pleasure. "Will, you've been missing for almost three Goddamn days!"

Will hums, blinks, licks his lips. "Oh," he replies, and lowers his hand and looks back to Jack. "Okay."

"O*kay*," Jack hisses, and he sounds like the monster Hobbs was. Will tilts his head, watches the chaotic shadow of anger, of relief. Feels them brush into him, and through him as if he were no more substantial than a ghost. Jack rubs a gloved hand over his face, looks Will up and down. "Jesus, you're a mess, Graham."

Will bares his teeth and pretends it's a grin. "Kind of you to say it to my face," he says.

Jack blinks at him, huffs. Growls, low, and shrugs off his thick, puffy jacket. He throws it over Will's shoulders and Will tilts his head, touches his cheek to the thick, fuzzy collar. Jack has warmed the innards and Will looks down at his hands, sees red.

Jack sees, too.

He clears his throat. "Hurt yourself?" he asks.

Will nods, following Jack away from the cabin where they found Abigail. He pulls Jack's coat around him and hums. "Yes."

"So that's your blood."

"You gonna test it?"

"Depends," Jack replies. His car is parked a little ways away, at the end of the dirt driveway that was almost overgrown. The trees touch Will's face, ache for his arms, and Will shrugs the jacket off to feel the crisp life in their leaves, the mossy wetness of their branches. "What will I find?"

"A rabid dog," Will replies. He gets in the car, rolls his shoulders, rolls his neck until he meets Jack's dark eyes. "It was self-defense."

"I'm sure," Jack replies. He turns on the car, blasts the warmth up high, and rubs his gloved hands together before taking off the gloves and settling his big hands on the steering wheel. He pulls around, a tight circle of border control and justice, and drives towards the main road. "I'll send a unit out to recover the body."

Will huffs, curls his upper lip, drums his toes against the floor of the car. "He's better suited for the ground."

"There is protocol, Will."

"Protocol," Will repeats, high and faint. He touches his lips, feels their blueness, their chill. Thinks of Hannibal's heat, and his burn. "Men like protocol, don't they?"

Jack doesn't answer.

Will sighs. "Am I strange, to you, Jack?"

"Yeah," Jack replies, gruff and honest and Will smiles. He likes that about Jack; his honesty. His integrity. The man will not lie if he can help it. "You're the strangest person I've ever met." Will's smile widens. "Do normal people seem strange to you, Will?"

"Normality is relative," Will replies with a shrug. Then, he tightens his hands, and presses his lips together. "Alana thinks I should see a psychiatrist."

Jack hums. "Well, I need to get you evaluated, before you go back to the field." He pauses. "If you want to return to the field. Because of you, and what you do, we found Abigail before she died. I could use a man like you, who sees things no one else can."

"I don't see, I ask," Will murmurs. He looks to Jack again. "You think it's imagination?"

"Imagination, whatever you want to call it," Jack replies. "I'd like to borrow it."

Will smiles. "A bargain?" he asks, teasing, though he knows Jack doesn't understand the significance of such a word. Not like Will does. "I work for you, and what do I get from it?"

"Most men ask for a salary."

"I'm not most men."

Jack makes a sound. "Got that right," he mutters. The trees part, sighing and waving a gentle goodbye to Will. Will nods to them, curls his fingers and places his nails against the window. He is warming, and with warmth, hunger and thirst rise in him. Three days; that's a long time to be missing.

Will smiles. "I will help you," he says. "For a salary. But first, I need time. I must make good on the bargain I struck to find the lost pup."

Jack nods, fingers flexing. He's uncomfortable talking about things like this. "Take all the time you need," he replies.

"You can help me, if you'd like."

"How?" Jack asks, frowning.

"Well, for starters, I need to go to the grocery store. Stock up. I could use the extra set of hands."

Jack nods. "When we return to D.C.," he says. And Will smiles, and settles, and closes his eyes.

Alana is at his house, when he returns. She rushes to him in a flurry of dogs and hits him straight in the chest. "You asshole!" she says, her eyes bright with both relief and tears. "Jack told me what happened. What the Hell *happened*?"

Will tilts his head and, in answer, shoves several grocery bags into her hands. She takes them with a huff of surprise, shoulders sagging, and he grabs the large bag of rock salt Jack helped him load. Jack did not come with him to his house, and they parted ways after finishing at the store.

"Do you have the stone I gave you?" Will asks, leading the way into the house. His dogs follow him, nosing curiously at his legs, but scatter when he sets the salt down by the cans of paint, knowing not to touch whatever comes near or crosses the door to his basement.

"Yes," Alana replies, flustered but still angry. She carries his bags inside and deposits them on the kitchen counter with a huff, and turns around to glare at him. "So you're not going to tell me?"

"You already know what happened," Will says with a shrug, opening his fridge and starting to stock. Alana picks up the loaf of molded bread and throws it away with another huff. "You said Jack told you."

"We both know Jack's version of the story is just that; a version," she replies icily. She tilts her head and looks him over. "You look like a fucking mess." Will blinks, surprised at her coarse language. "When did you last sleep, or eat?"

"When you fed me," Will replies. "And I slept on the plane."

Alana opens her mouth to reply and Will closes the fridge and fixes her with a look. "You must be careful, to guard your kind heart," he tells her, and holds out his hand. "Give me the stone and your phone."

Her jaws snap together tightly, and she reaches into the pocket of her jacket, handing both to him. Will smiles, feels the energy of her worry and stress radiate through the stone. It has always been smooth, but feels worn thin from her touch. He presses it to his lips, breathes in deeply. He goes to his table, and she follows, watching with wide eyes.

He sits, and unlocks her phone, pulling up his contact information. He kisses the stone, and touches it to his name. Then, he opens their text message chain, and does the same. The air stirs, and blinks at him, and in the corner of his eye he sees shadows uncast by dogs and by her. He sees her turn her head, watching as his silhouette reaches for her, and cups her face, pressing their foreheads together, though in reality they are still sitting apart.

"You are my friend, Alana," Will whispers. She nods, and her shadow nods too. "Say it out loud."

"I am your friend," she replies. "And you are mine."

Will's smile widens. He closes his eyes, and sucks in a breath, tilts his head back, and swallows the stone. When he opens his eyes, she's staring at him, and Will picks up her phone, and his, and places them together. He swallows, the hard knot of Alana's worry sinking into him, absorbing his body's current state; his hunger, his lethargy. The clawing ache of tiredness behind his eyes.

He clears his throat, coughs, and then sets the phones down and slides hers to her. "Ask it," he says.

Alana picks it up, and types out; "Will, are you alright?"

Will receives the text with a chime, and watches his own phone type out the reply;

"15%".

"Jesus Christ."

Will winces, huffs a sheepish laugh. "I need to eat," he murmurs. "And sleep."

Alana nods, and stands. She sets her phone down as Will does, and takes his hands, leading him to the kitchen. "Let's eat."

Will wakes in a field of flowers. They are devouring him, choking him at the neck and around his chest. He turns his head, suffocated by poppies, by orange mock flowers, by roses. He cannot breathe, and claws in futility at the thorns, at the vines. They tug, and constrict, and Will gasps, tries to roll onto his side, tries to fight off the weight of paralysis, but he cannot.

Then, he hears a yowl, and there are creatures on him now. He sucks in a breath, closing his eyes as he feels tiny bites at his flesh, and then they are spreading the flowers, consuming them whole. The vines loosen, retreating as cockroaches in light. And he surges upright, gasping, and opens his eyes again.

He is in Hannibal's field. The light shines down on him, the sun-cat howling with storm clouds and flurries of air. He looks down, and sees dozens of tiny creatures like his scorpion-cat, with their barbed tails and eagle claws. There is one for every facet of color the human eye can see.

At his feet sits their father, the one who guarded his shoes. It purrs, head tilting, glowing eyes golden, and Will smiles.

He pats at his neck, and frowns. He does not have the leather bag around his neck. He doesn't have anything except the clothes he fell asleep in. His eyes widen and he gasps, realizing he

spread no salt, started no game, painted nothing on the door. He did not go to his basement, but crossed the threshold in his dreams.

Panic wells up in him again, and he shoves the rest of the flowers off of him. He must get back to his house, must get back and cross over again before he is devoured here, for real. But before he can move, and stand, the sun-cat closes its eyes and Will trembles, moaning as he feels a single, large, blister-hot hand wrap around his chest and settle over his heart.

"Hush, sweet Will."

"*Hannibal*."

He feels Hannibal's smile, feels thorns spread from his hand, encasing Will's chest, but they do not cling. They support, as Hannibal settles behind him, crouches on clawed feet and too-long legs. He feels cavernous, and looms over Will, much larger than Will is. Will looks, sees Hannibal's other arm extend to the glittering rainbow of scorpion-cats that are still gnawing at the flowers. With the exception of their father, they are all the size of his palm, and the flowers match them and are devoured like locusts do fields of wheat.

"My creatures like you," Hannibal murmurs, and Will shivers, tilts his head, aches for the press of Hannibal's lips to his chilled skin. Hannibal's nose touches his cheek, and with a gesture-flick of his long fingers, a pile of flowers appears at Will's feet. They reek of meat, and Will watches as the cats eagerly devour the offering.

Will swallows, fingers flexing. "I have nothing to offer in thanks."

Hannibal laughs. "It is its own reward, to have a friend so sweet that he will disregard danger to see you," he purrs in reply. "But, if you wish to even the scales, I would ask for another kiss."

Will trembles, and turns. He is eager, and parts his lips for Hannibal's tongue, lets Hannibal's mouth sear him, weld them together. Hannibal's hand curls around his face, large enough to cover it, and Will moans when they part, flushing from the heat of Hannibal's touch. He licks his lips and tastes fire.

Hannibal smiles, his teeth glowing. "Did you find your girl?" he asks.

"Yes," Will replies. "Thank you."

"Oh, my dear one, it was a delight to be of service," Hannibal purrs. His eyes, glowing and flaring with burning light, drop to Will's lips. A single claw parts them and Will allows it, lashes fluttering and breath coming quick and fast. "I would service you again, if you asked."

Will knows this. That is what is dangerous about the Fey.

Yet, he winces. "I'm too weak to stay here."

Hannibal nods, and rests his forehead to Will's. Will wants to wrap his hands around Hannibal's horns, wants to pet through the thick thatch of feathers around his neck and trailing down his back. Yet he shakes, covered in vines, and does not feel afraid.

"The spell is simple," Hannibal breathes. Will opens his eyes, forces himself to hold Hannibal's gaze. "I will take you back to your body. You will not be lost."

"Please," Will whispers. He's starving, and sore, and so tired. His mouth burns, his tongue is ash. He wants to stay, wants to stay here with this powerful, dark thing. How might his future have been rewritten had he ventured to the darkness sooner.

He knows the spell, knows it like superconscious and the pervasive movement of time. "You may enter my world," he murmurs. He wants to lower his mouth, press his cheek to Hannibal's chest. Is there a heartbeat there? "The day is yours. Come with me, and be my friend."

Hannibal smiles. "May I have one more kiss, sweet traveler?" he asks.

No, Will needs to say. Should say. "Yes."

Hannibal kisses him, parts his lips and licks into Will's mouth and Will burns, he *burns* – and then the sun-cat opens its eyes and Hannibal is gone. The cats surround him, purring and chirping, and lead him home with haste.

Will wakes to a knock on his door. It rouses the dogs enough to trigger the spell and he hears it open, groans and rolls onto his back. He's on the pile of dog beds, and sees the silhouette of two people blacken the doorway.

He lifts his hand, shields his eyes, and winces.

"Will?"

"Alana," Will moans. His throat feels parched, and sore, like he swallowed coals. He coughs, clears his throat, and forces himself to his elbows and knees. His body shakes, starving and stricken. He coughs again and heaves, and winces when he feels the stone he swallowed clog his throat. He reaches into his mouth, finds the edge of it, and forces it back down, gagging, throat spasming in protest.

Alana's heels approach. Her hand finds his shoulder. "I brought a friend with me," she says. Will blinks, flinches, groans. "I want you to talk to him. He…knows about the things you do. He understands."

Will shakes his head. No one understands. Not really.

But the air shifts, thickens. The sun-cat blinks, and Will smells the flowers made of meat.

He lifts his eyes, wide, unfocused, and sees a man. A tall man, regal and proud, dressed finely and warm. Sees sharp cheekbones, dark eyes. Sees the man smile. Sees fangs.

Alana's face swims into view, and she smiles, and helps him sit up with gentle hands. She pets his sweaty hair from his face. "I've known him a long time," she says, trying to soothe, but Will is trembling. Trembling and sick, and he feels a burn on his tongue, feels hands, dark, big hands, on his chest. Feels vines and the brush of scorpion tails.

The sun-cat blinks again, and without his glasses, Will *sees*.

Hannibal smiles at him, robbed of his human façade in the darkness, and Will aches.

"Hello, Will."

Chapter 5

Hannibal's human glamor is beautiful, as most Fey are naturally in whatever form humans can perceive them. Will sees, beneath his skin, the sharpness of black cheekbones, the wide, wide span of his teeth. Behind Hannibal's human eyes, which are whiskey-brown and blurred with red, he glows.

The sun-cat opens its eyes again, and Will sags to the pile of dog beds, and tries not to be sick.

Panic crawls, cockroaches and creeping vines under his skin, for of all the things he knows about the Fey, and all the deals he has done, it never occurred to him that Hannibal would spend his twenty-four hours *here*.

Alana lets out a soft, worried noise, and cups Will's face. He can only shiver, sweaty forehead resting on her thigh. "He needs to eat," she says, and Will knows she is not talking to him. He paws weakly at her knee, wants her to be silent, to be still. She doesn't know how dangerous this is – information is like gold to the Fey, bargains traded as easily as spices and silver.

"Will, please. Can you eat?" she asks, brushing the flat of her nails over his cheeks. He needs to keep his eyes open, needs to protect her. He nods, weakly, and swallows around the harsh jut of her worry stone in his throat.

"I shall fetch him something," Hannibal declares, and his voice, which held no accent nor any gendered quality in the aether, feels warm, exotic. It presses on Will like the hands that drag him to the aether, down on his spine, flat across his hips, and he whimpers and fights the urge to present.

Soft steps track Hannibal's movements towards the kitchen. Will's eyes become slits, watching him slither into Will's home as if he has always been there. He sees Hannibal pause at the red-painted door, sees him brush tender knuckles over the handle, and then continue on his way.

"Alana," he croaks. He needs to warn her. He needs to ask her how this is possible – for she cannot commune with the Fey. She doesn't have the instincts and the breeding for it. Her pedigree is human, through and through. She shushes him, and touches his sweaty hair, and Will trembles as Winston lets out a soft, confused growl.

This the first time Will has brought something home, to this side of the ring.

He touches Alana's knee and forces himself to raise his head, to meet her eyes. Eyes give glimpses to the soul, and if that is true, Alana is yellow with worry, saccharine blue with anxiety, colored as glass and marble and Will needs her to leave, before Hannibal can drain her dry.

She helps him up, helps him kneel on trembling thighs and his fingers clench, his nostrils flare. His dogs are gathered in a breadcrumb trail from him to Hannibal, nosing curiously at

this stranger, though Winston remains by Will's side, knowing danger when he sees it.

"Will," Alana says soothingly.

"What's his name?" he asks.

Alana's brow creases, and a shadow passes behind her eyes, and that is when Will knows. The Fey have the power to enchant humans who cannot see them for what they are, and Will is sure, in this moment, that Alana has never met Hannibal before.

"Doctor Lecter," she finally says, rebooting to life like a machine, and she offers a smile. "He was my mentor at the university while I was finishing my thesis."

Will is sure such a man exists. He is not sure, however, that it was this man.

But Will nods, and pretends that all of this makes perfect sense. He cannot succumb too easily – bargains with Alana require a fight, by their very nature. He has crafted for himself his own glamor, a creature of rebellion and wayward, snapping synapses. He does not think like normal men, does not behave like normal men.

Would not react to the sudden introduction of a friend like normal men.

He cannot show Alana the truth. Such conflicting designs would ruin her perception of reality, forever alter her mindset until she was trapped between the aether and the human world. So he offers her a small, exhausted smile, and rubs his hands over his mouth, and sobs.

"I need help," he whispers.

She squeezes his shoulder, as gentle and sweet as she has always been, the very best friend he could ask for. "That's why I brought him," she replies.

And Will nods, as Hannibal emerges from his kitchen. He has in his hands a plate, thumb curled over a fork, and a mug of steaming coffee, which he carries to Will's table and sets down, so Will's back will be to the wall.

He turns, and offers Will a smile that has more teeth than normal men show. He offers his hand, and Will, like a fool, takes it. Hannibal is warm, incredibly warm for the chill in the room, and the sun-cat's lashes sweep across him as it blinks, showing Hannibal's silhouette as a thing with horns, with feathers and fangs.

He stands, quivering, shaken to the bone, and Alana follows suit. Hannibal leads him, palms brushing, elbow cupped, like he's an invalid, until Will manages to settle in his seat. On the plate is an offering of reheated rice, sliced rings of pineapple Will doesn't remember buying, and thick cuts of pink gammon. Will doesn't remember buying that either.

He lifts his eyes. "You brought this with you," he says.

"It's delicious, Will," Alana says, and Hannibal smiles at her. "We ate before we came. Please, help yourself."

Will closes his eyes, trembles weakly. Hannibal fed her. She's already in his debt.

Winston slithers behind Alana's legs, curls up beside Will like a guardian, his dark eyes on Hannibal. Will settles a hand between the dog's soft ears, and touches his fingers to the edge of his plate. He's hungry, he's starving, but eating Hannibal's food is another favor, another unspoken bargain offered and, if he eats, accepted. It will only put him further at Hannibal's mercy.

His mouth burns.

"I believe we are crowding him, my dear," Hannibal says, and nods towards the door. She follows his unspoken cue and heads towards it, and Will sobs, pressing at his throat, trying to push the stone he swallowed back down, but he's choking, he's choking and Hannibal is here and Will doesn't know what to do with himself.

A moment, an hour, a day later – but not a day, of course, time moves as it should here – Hannibal returns, and Will lifts his head as the other chair slides out and Hannibal sits. He is still coated, dressed warmly. Will's eyes dart out, through the window, to the plume of exhaust as Alana drives away.

He swallows.

"You fed her," he says.

Hannibal smiles, and there is a purr in his throat when he replies; "I did. Happily."

"What will you demand of her, in return?"

"My sweet friend, she has already repaid her debt," Hannibal says. "She brought me to you."

Will frowns. "Where did you wake?"

"My land is vast, my dominion over it absolute," Hannibal says gently. He nods to Will's plate, a silent command, and Will winces, and begins to pick at the rice, for this food is his own – leftover Chinese – and is not part of Hannibal's offer. "There is a hospital, not far from here, where the rift is weak. I emerged there, and smelled your lifeblood on her."

"So you charmed her," Will hisses, and lifts his eyes. "Made her see her friend. The one she wanted me to talk to."

Hannibal's head tilts, his smile soft and wide. "A rather neat arrangement, wouldn't you agree?"

Will does agree. Hannibal, the psychiatrist – trusted by Alana, vetted by Jack, no doubt. "If you clear me, I will be free to do more things that require your help," he whispers, blinking fever-quick down at his food. Rapid recoil, his understanding, snaps into place like a rubber band that finally breaks. "Why did you want to be with me? You might have travelled anywhere."

Hannibal hums. "The emptiness is vast, but vaster still when one is alone," he replies. "I thought you offered me companionship."

Will winces. "I did," he says, and takes another bite of rice. Hannibal watches him do it, sharp-eyed, assessing. "I just didn't presume that to mean you favored mine above anyone else's." Hannibal smiles, lifting his chin like Will's words are a challenge; a prick at his pride, to be courted and favored by a Fey. For Hannibal to admit it. "Will you always ask for twenty-four hours, in return for service?"

Hannibal's eyes flash, the sun-cat blinks and Will looks to their silhouettes, gasps, shakes when he finds Hannibal's horned and large and strong, touching the cheek of his own, though they are still parted. He brushes trembling fingers, callused and damp, against his cheek, imagines Hannibal's claws there.

Hannibal smiles. "That will depend on the nature of my service, darling," he purrs. "You should know better than anyone that every bargain is different." And Will knows that – he knows, and feels innocent and childish for questioning it. Hannibal is a creature of time and cliffsides, and his spread of influence is vast, and Will doesn't know if he's afraid or assured to know Hannibal's claws can reach him, here.

Hannibal's eyes slant away, and he hums. "What lies behind your red door?"

Will tilts his head, narrows his eyes and imagines Hannibal's glamor is thinner, the less he sees; his lashes a filter, and without his glasses, the veneer is weak. "Sanctuary," he replies.

Hannibal sighs. "I wish you would eat," he says.

"So you might garner more favors from me?"

"Does insidious intent always cloak itself in friendship, for you?"

Hannibal's eyes move back to him, spear him, the same color as blood in sunlight, the arcs of sunbeams through weathered stone and amber. He is beautiful, and Will's jaw aches, his stomach does a strange twist, and his free hand curls in Winston's scruff so that he does not lunge.

Hannibal smiles. "Will," he says, and Will's name sounds like benediction, like praise and prayer; "I will not do you the disservice of telling you your wariness is not unfounded. There is always an otherness between man and everything not man. But my intentions are honorable."

"Your intentions," Will rasps.

Hannibal nods, and leans forward, setting his elbows on the table. He finally removes his gloves, revealing hands covered in tanned skin, wide and strong, thickly-veined. His wrists, almost delicate in comparison, the knot of bone and the flex of tendon on the innards of his wrist. Will's teeth feel numb, feel cold, and he can't stop thinking that Hannibal's flesh would warm them nicely if he were to get it between his jaws.

"It is not often I find myself in pleasant company," Hannibal says, without guile, eyes fixed on Will's and Will cannot look away. He brushes his fingers down his jaw again and remembers Hannibal's kiss. His mouth is dry; he swallows, yet nothing comes to wet his tongue. Hannibal's eyes drop to the motion of his tongue as it snakes out to dampen his lower lip. He seems to shiver, or perhaps it is just his glamor, growing thin for a moment. "Your company is very pleasant."

"And that's all you want?" Will says. "Company?"

Hannibal's eyes grow very dark, near-black, when he growls; "Yours, specifically. Yes."

Will shivers, and looks to their shadows. Hannibal's silhouette is near him, now, standing above him, consuming him. They might melt into one once the night-cat emerges. He whimpers. "You make me feel strange things." He blinks, slowly, and Hannibal's shadow is suddenly tied to his feet again, sitting apart, and Will aches with loss. "Things I have never felt before. It frightens me."

Hannibal hums. "Because you like it?"

"Because I know what it means."

"And what does it mean, darling?"

Hannibal is showing too many teeth. Will trembles, and sets his fork down. "What will you ask of me, if I allow your offering to sate my hunger?"

Hannibal's eyes dip, he blinks, and then lifts again, and light returns to his iris, showing Will the red, the gold, the earth-tone brown. His lips, pinked and lovely, purse in thought. He sits back, sighing, and looks around Will's home – to the pile of dog beds, where most of them have returned to doze. To the red door. Outside, to the stretch of verdant fields tracked with mud. His head tilts, and he looks to Will again, considering.

"There is…something I want," he admits.

Will feels chill air wrap around the back of his neck, the giggle of draft touches his ears, which feel warm and tender under Hannibal's gaze. His cheeks, too, so cold; the frosty whiteness of his knuckles. His mouth, so dry, aches for wine and juice. He thinks of Persephone and imagines the pomegranate tasted just like this ache.

"And what is that?"

Hannibal smiles.

"Kiss me," he says, "and I will tell you."

Will pushes himself to his feet, before conscious thought, before instinct can tell him to stop. He circles Winston, circles the table, and stutters to a halt at Hannibal's knees. He reaches out, touches skin that is smooth and warm, so very warm. Brushes his thumb below the swell of Hannibal's lower lip. Thinks of bruising it, of biting it, of tasting wine on Hannibal's tongue.

"Here?" he whispers, thumb at the corner of Hannibal's mouth.

Hannibal smiles, low-lidded, so many teeth. He takes Will's hand, guides it to where Will wants to rest it, across the side of his neck, and Will sags weakly, feeling a heartbeat, feeling a pulse. Whatever Hannibal is, he is most certainly alive.

He reaches out, and Will's fingers flex, dig in, when Hannibal's nail scrapes between his parted lips. Touches his tongue, and he tastes like fresh meat and the spice of cinnamon. "Here," he says, nodding, and Will shivers, and leans in. Their foreheads touch, first – then, noses brushing. Will puts his free hand on Hannibal's cheek, lets the magic of him soak through his fingers and remembers how it felt when he was a child, when he first followed a wildling into the aether, how she'd laughed brightly and pinched Will's cheeks, marveling at his humanity.

Her flowers were lavender, and Will still can't stand the smell of them.

"Kiss me, sweet boy," Hannibal growls, warm, and Will sinks forward that final inch and lets their lips meet. Hannibal snarls, and bites, immediately, and Will flinches back, releases him and staggers until his back hits the wall. Hannibal rises, pursuing him, and Will feels a cry bubbling up but then Hannibal is there, he's there and his hand is in Will's hair, cupping his nape, and Will's breath seizes, body stiffening, when Hannibal kisses him again.

Again, and again, and this is hunger. This is pomegranate seeds, and whiskey, and Will's lungs burn, and he clutches Hannibal's coat, parts his lips when Hannibal asks entrance for his tongue. He kisses like a man, feels like a man, unequivocal in the strength of his chest against Will's, the spread of his large, warm hands on Will's sweat-soaked ribs. He kisses like a rabid animal consumes, and Will's heart is racing, he feels blind and mute in the darkness of his closed eyelids.

Hannibal parts from him with a growl, licks the seam of Will's lips and shudders, just as affected. He nuzzles Will's cheek, snarls, and Will trembles, his shoulders aching from being pressed into the wall. He licks his lips, feels Hannibal's heat clinging to them, and Hannibal lifts his head, lifts his eyes from Will's, his exhale heavy and Will doesn't know if it's because human sensation is different for him, he doesn't know if it's Will himself, but Will has never seen one of the Fey folk so affected by something as simple as a kiss.

He touches Hannibal's chest, marveling at the race of his heart, and Hannibal shivers, cupping Will's face, and meets his eyes again.

"The magic here is strong," he whispers. "How much of your blood lingers, in the walls, in the soil?"

"All I could give," Will replies, and that is true – he was dwelled here for many years, and his sweat, his blood, his lifeforce has made the house grand, made the bridge he built in his basement strong. His parents taught him how to tie wood and stone to his soul, how to guard and ward himself against anything that might try to chip away at his strength. Even if he were to perish, the house would remain a gateway, a border guard, until it was torn down.

Hannibal smiles, like this is a personal victory to him, and pets Will's sweat-damp hair from his face. Will swallows. "I have given you a kiss," he says. "Now tell me what it is you want from me."

Hannibal's eyes shine, even robbed of light. His face is a mess of sharp angles and shadows and Will can't resist sliding his fingers along Hannibal's collarbones. He aches to feel his feathers, wants Hannibal's great shadow to cover him, to consume him, and this is what the Fey do; this is glamor, and control, and Will has to be calm and remember to think clearly but he can't, he can't, and Hannibal won't let him.

"You are able to pass through between our worlds," Hannibal tells him. "Without ritual. Without sacrifice." His head tilts. "Has this always been so?"

Will nods. When he was a child, he would often dream of drifting from his bed, of walking listlessly between the rooms of his home, out into the streets where the air was damp and clinging. He would meet strangers there, sprightly creatures of shade and dust that wanted him to play games with them while the night-cat watched. It wasn't until he told his father that he realized what he had been doing, the danger there.

The door, the salt, the ring – it is necessary, but only for the sake of his own safety. Will, in truth, can see the aether wherever it is strongest, and walks between those places as easily as he might change into and out of a set of clothes.

Hannibal's upper lip curls, something hungry in his eyes, and Will's neck feels cold. "I would ask to be welcome in your home," he whispers, touching his forehead to Will's. "Give me freedom, to follow your line of blood and sweat, so I might always find you."

Will's eyes widen, and he shoves at Hannibal's chest, for it's only with the loss of his warmth that clarity returns. "*No*," he snarls, and Hannibal smiles at him, but there is something festering in his eyes and Will's hackles rise, his shoulders rise, and he sets his teeth against each other and shows Hannibal all of them.

And Hannibal's smile merely widens. He turns away, gathers his gloves and puts them on, and straightens the off-center collar of his coat, left askew by Will's hands. Will is shaking, sweating anew, wants to fall to his knees at Hannibal's feet, feel claws at his throat, a burn on his lips. He wants and he wants and he is afraid, now. So deeply afraid.

Be careful of the dark Fey, my dear boy, for they are beautiful and wonderful and will have your soul if you give it to them.

Will grits his teeth. "I'd like you to leave."

Hannibal hums. "As you wish it, my darling traveler," he purrs. He smiles at Will, sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued, and Will trembles. "We will meet again." He pauses, and looks to Will's plate. "Eat. I demand no offering in return. Your sweet kiss was tribute enough."

Before Will can speak, the sun-cat blinks, slow as drowning, and when its eyes open and shine down on Will's house, Hannibal is no longer there. He does not linger in the shadows,

does not perch atop Will's silhouette. Will gasps, feeling suddenly so cold, and slides to his haunches against the wall, his head in his hands.

Winston trots up to him, woofing with something like concern, and presses his warm flank to Will's thigh. Will shivers, drops one hand to fist the dog's thick scruff tightly. It reminds him of Hannibal's mane, and he flinches, letting go.

He rises, unsteady, and flings himself at his front door. It opens easily, and several of his dogs run out, and Will searches – searches for footprints in the grass, for an extra car, but finds none. He is alone, just the cat in the sky and his dogs on the ground, and he stumbles out, bare-footed, barely dressed, into the frigid air.

"Hannibal!" he yells, cupping his hands to his mouth, and his voice echoes, discordant, amidst the dreadful silence. The trees shift for the sound of it, waving gently in the breeze, and Will's eyes are wet and stinging, his mouth burns. "Hannibal!"

No answer comes. He is gone.

Will trembles, weak at the neck. He touches his throat and thinks there's a new wetness there, draws his fingers back and sees as much red as was on his hands when he killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs. But his neck has not been clawed. He does not see blood on his clothes, staining the wood beneath his feet.

His fingers curl, and are white again. "*Fuck*," he growls. He turns back in and grabs his phone and calls Alana.

"Will, is everything alright?"

"Come see me," he says, harsh. He eyes the food, eyes the coffee, and picks both plate and mug up and throws them straight into the trash, contents and all. "Or I can come to you."

"Will, I -."

"I need to teach you things, Alana," Will says before she can protest. "You need to learn. I can't keep protecting you."

Her silence is heavy, probably offended because Will always manages to offend people when he's trying to help. Then, she says, slowly; "I can come by this afternoon?" And it's a question, like one misstep will send the timebomb in Will's chest off.

"Good," Will murmurs, shoulders rolling, wrists, hands, everything hurts and aches and his stomach is on fire and that stone, that stone, sits in the back of his throat and he wonders if Hannibal could taste it on his tongue. "I'll be waiting."

He hangs up, runs his hands through his hair, and goes to the kitchen. He grabs a loaf of bread and eats three slices, plain, until his chest aches with heartburn. He washes it down with water, and paces, head on fire, spine numb and liquid.

He can't shake the feeling that he has just made a terrible, terrible mistake.

Jack calls him before Alana arrives.

"Will," he says, and in his voice is a thousand years of time and space, echoing in the vast halls of mighty kings, and Will might be sick. "I need your help."

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The air smells of rosewater. It is a thick scent, that touches the place between the roof of the mouth and the gag reflex and makes Will's nose wrinkle, makes his tongue snap out, touch, tap the back of his teeth and floods his mouth with saliva.

He gets out of his car, his stag pawing at the ground with a restless air, and keeps the engine running. He doesn't know what Jack called him out for, but it's not difficult to guess. Above their heads, shimmering and golden, the sun-cat's eye gazes down at them as a child peering through a magnifying glass to burn ants. It is a detached look Will has never felt before, and he shivers, shoulders rolling, and cannot help but think that the sun-cat is angry with him.

"Oh, Will, good, there you are," Jack says, and catches his shoulder, thumbs pinching behind and in front of the muscle, steering him towards the barrier of yellow tape. He resists the urge to snap his teeth and growl, instead fishes his glasses out of his jacket pocket and slides them into place across his nose and over his ears. Immediately, the vibrancy in the air is lost. The afterglow of teal and pink and soft purples is gone, replaced with flat grey, over-saturated sunlight-orange, and the bright red, garish splash of blood.

Will blinks, blinks again, and presses his lips together hard enough that his teeth ache. His lips burn, his neck burns, and he brushes his fingers on either side of his face, from the corner of his glasses to his jaw, and back up until the skin stretches and grows sharply aching beneath his nails.

His nostrils flare.

"Tell me what you see," Jack murmurs.

It is the head of a stag, positioned just so, so that the animal's mighty antlers hold up the limp body of a dead girl. She is displayed artfully, in the same way bad erotica is artful, something to be hidden and tittered over by young blood that doesn't know any better.

He strides towards the corpse and is stopped, suddenly, by a woman with long black hair, a coat so white it hurts to look at, and sharp eyes that make him flinch. He jerks his head, steps back a half-measure, and finds Jack at his back.

"Beverly, let him look," Jack says, commanding and stern. She looks at Jack, brow arched, but subsides and hands Will a pair of latex gloves that smell dully like talcum powder and regurgitated plastic. Nevertheless he pulls them on, and looks down at them, marveling at the perfect not-sky blue as it stretches over his knuckles.

He imagines his knuckles split open, bleeding, and wonders if the plastic would burn him then.

His eyes lift, and he moves to the body. The stag's eyes are intact, flat and black and staring outwards. The girl's body has been speared in such a way that nothing vital has been pierced. Will tilts his head, leans down, and places his hand wide above her collarbones. She is such a dainty, frail looking thing.

He leans down, and breathes in deeply at her neck.

Poisonous. Branding. This girl smells like ash and like hunger and Will doesn't know what that's supposed to feel like, but he thinks of the flowers in Hannibal's garden and wonders if they eat like this.

He pulls back, straightens with a growl, and rubs a hand through his hair. The gesture pushes at his glasses and he catches a flash of – of something. Frowning, he takes them off, and looks upon the girl again, and what he sees makes every knot in his spine tense up and scream.

The stag is white, now. The girl has turned into the amorphous mass that was Garrett Jacob Hobbs, after Will shot him. Bulbous eyes stare at him from a face wet and swollen with river water. The white stag's rose quartz horns glisten in the sunlight, and from the body's chest sprout a dozen flowers in a rich bouquet that smells like meat.

Will turns away, heaving, and puts his glasses back on.

"Will!" It's Jack's voice, and again a hand comes down like the wrath of God and pulls him upright and Will is staring into Jack's stone-eyes, looking upon a man so human and so real that it hurts to look at him with glasses on, but Will dares not remove them and gaze upon the corpse.

Will clears his throat, and rasps; "It wasn't Hobbs."

Jack's eyes narrow, his brows form a thick line with snaps of concerned wrinkles, like pleats in fancy suit pants. "I know that," he replies. "Because Hobbs is dead. We recovered his body."

Will nods. "A copycat, then," he murmurs.

Jack rubs a hand across his mouth, huffing a frustrated breath through his nose and Will winces, looking down, for Jack's anger feels like the judgement of the sun-cat and Will doesn't know what he did *wrong*, just knows he did wrong, and there is something familiar about this, this place and this design and he doesn't want to think about what that is, can only acknowledge *that it is*.

"Will," Jack murmurs, snapping his attention like a rubber band back to the present, the here and now. The air is too warm on Will's neck, his mouth and his tongue burn as though branded and he -.

Branded.

His eyes widen, and he pushes at Jack and takes his glasses off. He is prepared for what he sees, this time. He approaches the girl and, ignoring the protests of Beverly and the crime scene photographer, he puts his hand on the girl's jaw and pinches her nose with the other, pulling her lips and her teeth apart.

He looks in, and sees her mouth is black on the inside.

After that, anger rises up in him swiftly. He lets her go with a dismissive grunt, tears the gloves off his hands and scratches at his wrists. "I'll find the copycat," he says, upper lip lifting to show the points of his teeth, all set on their edges. His shoulders roll, too tense. "I'll find him."

Jack's face is dark, but he nods. "Good."

Will nods back, and puts his glasses back on, and the girl is just a girl, the stag is just the normal brown and black of normal stag – though, he must admit, the size is quite impressive. He wonders if it was stolen from some museum, or hunted and dragged here.

He goes back to his car, feels the stag inside its heart rumble and purr, and he turns away from the crime scene, visor swept low to stop the sun-cat glaring at him. He has not felt its anger ever before in his life and he wonders if it will bring a drought, or an unearthly warm spring. If, when the sun-cat sleeps, its cousin will be similarly stern with Will.

He drives home and immediately goes to his room, grabbing a bag of salt and another of iron filings, all of them clumping together before he shakes them loose. Then, he whistles for Winston, and goes back downstairs, the dog at his heels. He takes his glasses off and flings them onto the table, and sheds his shoes.

He unties his bag from Winston's collar and puts it around his own neck.

That done, he leaves his house, his toes and bare feet protesting sharply as he leaves the cold porch and steps out into frigid grass, earth swept in water and then hardened into frosty furrows. He walks, around the back of the house, and out towards the boat shed that lies behind the main property.

Inside is the rusting shell of a boat – a project he finds himself ignoring more and more, especially since he was tasked to help locate Hobbs, and then later, Abigail. He hopes she is alright, but it would be inappropriate to visit her. He did kill her father, after all.

He clicks his tongue and Winston halts, panting, tail wagging wildly. Will opens the bag of iron and kneels down behind the boat carcass, pours some into his palm and carefully presses the iron into a small groove, in a circle just large enough for him to sit up in. This is his second portal, which is less protected and therefore less used.

He carefully rubs the iron into the grooves, frowning when he sees that the circle is very thin, easily breakable. He looks to Winston. "Gonna have to keep an eye out," he says. Winston's head tilts, folded ears cocked forward, and he licks his nose.

Typical.

Will opens the bag of salt and pours it in a thick ring around the iron, before he sets the bag to one side and sits, cross-legged, in the middle of the ring. He doesn't like just sitting, would much prefer to lay down so that he can be more comfortable – and he's prone to tossing and turning in sleep, there's no reason to suspect he wouldn't do so while walking through the aether.

But that is not his intention now.

He closes his eyes, tilts his head back, and breathes in deeply. His nostrils flare and his lips, dry, part and spread like he's about to scream. No sound comes out, and he feels a hand around his neck, feels a touch both gentle and strong wrap around his throat and squeeze. Another hand, through his hair like the tug of the wind – a laugh, somewhere, soft and feminine.

He opens his eyes and sees her.

She floats above him like a rope artist, swathed in raggedy clothing that looks either very old, or does not exist at all. She tilts her head at him, grinning wide enough to garner the envy of a shark, and Will watches, tilting his head. As his eyes move, so too does she, coming down to Earth and landing on the tips of her bare toes, just outside the ring of salt.

At her feet is a scorpion-cat. It is not white, nor one of the colored kittens, but has the striped markings of a tabby, and eyes the color of bright moss. He swallows, and thinks of what Hannibal had told him – "My creatures like you". This girl, and her cat, are connected to him, somehow.

The cat chirps softly, black scorpion tail flexing as it stands and crosses the salt pile, through the iron ring. It is purring, and rubs its soft, small head against Will's knee, before jumping in his lap and curling up tight. Will's hand falls to it, absently measuring the vibration of its purr.

"Her name is Harper," the girl says.

Will's eyes snap up, fix upon the girl's face. She is elfin and lovely to look at, her hair falling to her shoulders, platinum blonde – but not in a fake way. Rather, she looks as though she has been kissed by the sun-cat. Her eyes glow like sunlight off of water and sand, and she folds her arms across her chest and fixes Will with a pout.

"You've been cheating," she says.

Will blinks at her, and frowns.

"You're supposed to play the games!"

Oh. Will huffs a laugh, and shakes his head. "I'm sorry," he replies, still petting the cat as it rolls to bare its belly. Will is wary of the eagle-like front paws, but the cat seems more than content to simply purr and be petted, and regards Will with half-closed, wide-pupiled eyes. "I won't forget again. I didn't mean to."

The girl puffs, tossing her hair out of her face.

"What may I call you?" Will asks.

She hums, toeing at the line of salt, though her foot merely passes through it, and cannot cross the barrier of iron. Through the open barn doors, the little bat-like creatures have begun to gather, tracing the flower path of his mortal energy, eager to feast on him. Will tenses, but before one of them gets close, Harper turns, and launches herself from his thigh with a hiss. She lands upon one of the creatures and Will watches, wide-eyed, as her jaw unhinges and she swallows it whole.

"My name is Mischa," the girl says, drawing Will's attention back. "You've been speaking with my brother."

Will's brow creases, and he bites his lower lip. "Hannibal is your brother?" he asks.

She grins at him, and nods. She steps forward and crouches down on the balls of her feet, hands planted just shy of the ring. Her eyes appear too large, too wide, and reflect Will's entire face in the iris. "He wants me to stop playing games with you," she says, and when she smiles her teeth are sharp and she has more than one row of them.

Will swallows, and asks, "Why?"

She shrugs, sitting up, bird-like, her fingers encasing her knees and her balance impeccable on only her toes. "I think he is afraid I'll eat you," she says plainly.

And Will cannot help laughing, and saying, "Would he rather eat me himself?"

Mischa giggles, pressing both hands over her mouth. "I like you!" she says, in that way younglings say things – to the point. They're much like lawmen, in that way. She straightens and hums, turning away from him, her arms out to either side as she does a small twirl. "Why are you here, travelling man? I know it's not to see me."

Will sighs, and touches his fingers to his mouth. Then, down, wrapping his knuckles in the leather string holding the bag about his neck.

"I suppose I was…expecting someone else," he admits.

Mischa turns on her heel, hair whipping around her face and settling atop her shoulders again. At her feet, her cat has decided to stop eating the bat-like creatures, and presses against her legs, purring loudly. Will tips his head up, eyeing her again, and blinks.

Streaming in through the top-most window – that cannot truly be called a window, for it is merely a hole rendered useful by woodpeckers, by squirrels and nesting birds – sunlight

comes, illuminating Mischa and Harper. And then the sun-cat blinks, giving Will's shoulders a gracious respite, and Will sees her. He sees the family resemblance.

She is smaller than her brother, but has the same blackened skin, the same glowing eyes that are slitted like a cat's eyes. From her temples are horns like a yearling deer, soft and velvet-looking instead of the strong, bone-like ones Hannibal has. Her eyes are not golden, though, like her brother's, but a soft ocean blue, which matches the subtly aqua-silver sheen on the edges of her mane of feathers.

She grins at him, and then the sun-cat opens its eyes again, and Will sees the little girl.

"How did you decide on this glamor?" Will asks. He wants to reach out and touch her, but cannot responsibly leave the protection of his iron circle. He knows, already, that she would sooner eat him than play with him.

She shrugs, picking at the edges of her dress, and tosses her hair. Around her ankles, Harper has laid herself out, forming a puddle of black and brown, eyes set on the off-focus shadow of Winston at Will's side.

"I watched," she says. "I learned."

Will swallows. "I won't keep you," he says, and stands. "But, I wonder, if you would tell your brother I would like to speak to him?"

She looks at him, eyes sparkling, and tilts her head, folds her arms, and pouts. "What will you give me?"

Will smiles. "I don't have much on me," he says, and pulls the string over his head. He opens his bag and pours the contents into his hand, revealing several small stones and some pieces of the dried meat he offers to the cats.

She tilts her head, birdlike, and eyes the stones in his hand. She hums, lips pursed out like she's asking for a kiss, and Will shivers, thinking of Hannibal, of his fire, of his teeth and the touch of his claws – and then the feel of him, human as he can be, pressing Will against the wall and clouding his mind with technicolor flowers and deep, deep magic.

She huffs, and reaches out, plucking the stones from his hand. "Feed Harper the meat," she says, and Will nods, tossing it over the ring of salt for the cat to consume. Harper rises, purring loudly, and her tongue – snake-like and curling – snaps around the meat as she eats. "I will tell my brother to visit you."

Will smiles. "Thank you, Mischa," he says. "Next time I ask for your help I will be more prepared. What kinds of things do you like?"

She laughs, the sound high and crystalline like shattering glass. "I like games!" she says, and then she is gone in a blink of the sun-cat's eyes. Will breathes in, deeply, through his nose, and nods to himself, hands on his hips as he looks down at the ring of iron around his bare feet. Slowly, cold is seeping into his toes, the almost-water of the aether air fading away,

drying out, and as he heaves in a breath that smells of motor oil and grass, and blinks, the world rights itself and returns to the hue of the living land.

He kneels down and wipes his thumb through the iron, grimacing when only a little comes away. "Remind me to get more of this," he tells Winston, who licks his muzzle and yawns at him. Will sighs, standing, and steps over the ring of salt, brushing his hands across his thighs.

He clicks his tongue and Winston follows him out of the barn, quickly joining the rest of Will's pack as they frolic and investigate the open fields for good places to dig and mark. Will hurries to his home, his toes red with cold, his entire body shivering despite the heat of the sun-cat's gaze. It still feels angry, or perhaps disappointed. He doesn't like this feeling in the slightest.

He climbs the porch and freezes at the threshold of his open door. There, inside his house, Hannibal stands in front of the painted red door. He swivels towards Will as Will grinds to a halt, a genteel smile on his face and Will is shocked, breathless, because Hannibal shouldn't have been able to get inside.

"How did you get in?" he demands, and steps over the threshold. He goes to the pile of dog beds where Buster is still dozing, and nudges his feet under his bed, seeking warmth. Buster gives a little wag of his tail, huffing, but does not stir except to puff out a loud breath.

Hannibal smiles at him. "You invited me," he says.

Will frowns. "No," he replies coldly. "I did not."

Even now, his body remembers the distance between them, and remembers that that the reduction of that distance would be wholeheartedly welcomed. He brings to mind in perfect clarity the shudder of Hannibal's inhale, the flutter of his lashes, the way he'd *grabbed*, so assured and desperate at Will's flanks. Will's glasses are still on his table, and in their absence he can see Hannibal's black skin, his impressive horns, his sharp teeth.

Hannibal approaches him on silent feet, and Will shivers, for he is warm, the heat of him emanating like a roaring fire, and his silhouette has claws and is tall, monstrously tall, so much that Will feels compelled to lift his chin to meet Hannibal's eyes, though his glamor only places him an inch or two above Will.

Hannibal smiles. "You wished to speak to me?" he asks.

Will swallows harshly, and nods – he has to focus. He has to *focus.* "Who was that girl?" he asks.

Hannibal's smile widens, and he reaches out to cup Will's cheek, and Will flinches a fraction of a second too late, and Hannibal has his long fingers wrapped behind his neck. Hannibal steps closer – he is no longer wearing his coat, nor his gloves, and he burns.

Will ducks his head, shakes his head sharply, and flattens his hands on Hannibal's chest, pretending the intention is to push him away. "Please," he whispers. "Don't lie to me."

"Oh, darling," Hannibal says, and his voice is a purr, is soothing and enticing and promises warmth and comfort and strength. Even here, outside the aether, dressed as a human, Will can feel that Hannibal is strong. "I would never lie to you."

"Then tell me who that girl was."

Hannibal hums, petting over Will's neck, across his pulse. His fingers curl beneath Will's chin and force his eyes to lift. "Someone who owed me a debt," he says, his eyes dark and reddened like the blood has stained his iris. "A debt I came to collect, since you so generously granted me the freedom to do so."

Will frowns, and he knows, immediately, that the emotion curling up in his chest, flexing and snarling behind his ribs, is not the emotion he's supposed to be feeling. It is not outrage, that Hannibal used him to take his pound of flesh. It is not anger, over Hannibal's actions, nor horror. It is not fear, as he feels Hannibal's claws dig into his vulnerable neck and sees the monster's teeth grinning wide at him.

No. It is jealousy.

He shoves Hannibal back and snarls at him. "So you've made deals with others," he says, and gestures towards the outside world, and all its wonders and terrifying things. "Others like me?"

Hannibal tilts his head, and there is a flash of something prowling, something with its own purr and Will feels cold, suddenly, feels it in his hands and on his face and across his lips. He whines, shaking his head sharply.

"Darling," Hannibal murmurs, his voice so gentle, as chaotically alluring as a siren song. "I promise, there is no other like you."

Will hisses. "So now you seek to flatter me?" he demands, and steps away from the dog beds, circling Hannibal until Hannibal is between him and the door. Hannibal follows, his silhouette unmoving, head cocked and watching Will like a cat watches a mouse. As Will's shadow touches Hannibal's, he feels an abrupt tug and then his hands are on Hannibal's chest again, and their shadows are entwined like lovers, and Hannibal's fingers slip and settle gently around his waist.

Will swallows. "Release me," he says.

Hannibal smiles, and slides one hand up, up Will's spine, to his neck. Up, to his hair, fisting with a gentle but firm tug. Will's lips part, his lashes flutter, and his fingers curl in the suit jacket Hannibal has donned. He knows he cannot fight, not like this, still starving and exhausted and shivering with cold, but -.

Hannibal releases him and Will almost stumbles to his knees. He catches himself on the back of one of his chairs, gasping, one hand to his chest, for it feels like his heart is trying to beat out of his ribs and follow Hannibal as he steps away.

Unbidden, a whimper escapes him, and he sinks to his knees slowly, clutching at the chair with one hand, the other reaching out blindly. "Don't," he groans, feverish, sweating. He shakes his hair from his eyes and lifts his gaze but can only make it as far as Hannibal's shadow. "Don't go."

Hannibal sighs. "Unfortunately, my sweet boy, my time here is nearing its end." Will whines, and shakes, because that can't be right, it can't be.

Will swallows. "I want you to stay," he says, before he can stop himself.

There is a silence. A long, blistering one that stretches through eons, through the birth and death of creation, through the single point where a concept becomes an idea becomes a thought, and then, then, Hannibal's hand is gentle in his hair, and he crouches down at Will's side.

Will's lashes flutter, and open wide, and he meets Hannibal's eyes.

"If you allow me to stay," Hannibal says, very quietly, the weight of dynasties and newly-formed stars in his voice, "you know what that means."

Will does. He knows, and he wishes he didn't, because while ignorance is no excuse it certainly is bliss.

He shakes his head and looks away. "Go home," he says, as if it were that easy. "Go back to your field and your flowers and your cats."

Hannibal lets out a low, angry sound, like the snarl of a wildcat, and pushes himself to his feet. His hands leave Will's hair, leave his skin, and Will shudders and rubs the heel of his hand against his jaw because he feels like he's burning from the inside.

Then, Hannibal's voice comes to him, cleaving through the distress; "It was a pleasure doing business with you, Will," he says, and he is cold and distant, so suddenly. Will winces, looking up, and sees Hannibal has donned a coat, and is pulling on gloves, though he certainly doesn't need them. Hannibal looks at him, hooks and spears in his eyes, and Will feels gutted. "Let me know if you're in need of my service again."

"Hannibal," Will breathes, as Hannibal strides past him and over the threshold. "I'm sorry! I'm -."

He heaves, his throat going tight and suddenly so dry. Alana's worry stone rises up in the base of his neck and his phone chimes. He reaches for it blindly, pushing down the stone until the muscles in his throat take over, and reads her text;

"I'm on my way. Please tell me you've eaten something and slept since I left."

Will swallows, wincing again. The sun-cat blinks and he is shrouded in darkness.

He curls up on himself and throws his phone across the room, his head in his hands. He aches, and aches, and his heart is pounding like he's been sprinting a thousand miles, his head hurts from forcing his eyes to see too much of the aether in a day, through the mortal coil, and

his hands are shaking so bad that if he were to touch anything porcelain, he would surely shatter it.

Tears have welled up, and spill down his cheeks, and this emotion, this emotion he knows well. It is regret, followed swiftly by righteous indignation at his own self. He cannot possibly house one of the Fey here. To do that would only cause madness.

And yet.

His lips feel cold, and he knows the instant Hannibal has crossed to the other side, shed his veneer and his glamor and taken residence in the dark part of the forest. He will sit, and wait for Will, and Will's only gratification is that, at least to him, time will not pass so slowly.

He looks up as he hears Alana's car, his dogs barking in happy greeting as they run to meet her. Will sighs, and swipes his hands over his mouth, and stands. He must teach her everything he knows, if she is to protect herself or if Hannibal takes a special interest in her.

Again, that roiling knot of jealousy rears up. His upper lip curls back as he goes to his room and grabs his box of stones, of papers, of sage. He tamps down the jealousy as much as he can, but it lingers, flickering like a small candle flame, deep in his chest, untouched by wind or water.

He must protect Alana. Both from any of Hannibal's intentions, and Will's inevitable reaction to them. For the Fey are beautiful, and enchanting, and will surely eat your heart and soul if you let them.

"Will?" her voice calls, the scuffle and scurry of his dogs, and Will goes downstairs and smiles when he sees her. She responds in kind, shrugging off her coat. "Hey. How you feeling?"

"Fine," he replies tersely. He gestures for her to sit and she obeys, and he takes the other chair. "Are you ready to learn?"

"Yes," she says, and she does seem eager enough. If only enthusiasm was as good an armor as knowledge.

"Good," he says, and nods, and opens the box. "Let's begin."

Chapter End Notes

please check out the AMAZING art that's being done for this fic in the fey!Hannibal tag on my Tumblr! (and feel free to some scream at me about it there, I'm always open to being yelled at) :D

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the delay, darlings! Enjoy the chapter <3

"So the biggest things you will need to start being aware of and carrying with you is iron and salt. Iron acts as a barrier, and a weapon. Salt is a deterrent and distraction."

Alana frowns, worrying her lower lip. "Distraction?" she repeats.

Will nods, and sets his elbows on the table. His face is tacky with tears, his eyes red-rimmed like the bright echo of a solar eclipse and everything hurts. Still, it is taking everything in him not to run to his basement, or out into the woods, screaming for Hannibal to return to him. He has never felt such an immediate, intimate connection to one of the Fey. Certainly never allowed them to touch him, or kiss him – he can barely handle mortals doing it.

He rubs his hands over his face and swipes beneath his eyes. Where the fuck are his glasses? It hurts to look at anything. With the barrier of iron at his threshold, the aether folk that are unwelcome cannot venture here, and not through the iron ring. The creatures creep in because the house was built around them, but for most other visitors he must go outside, to his barn.

"Fey are…compelled, to count salt," he tells her, shrugging one shoulder. "I don't know why. But it's why there's that myth of throwing the salt over your shoulder. It draws them in and then you have to spread it around so they count it instead of coming for you."

She tilts her head, obviously skeptical, but swallows and nods. "And…the iron?" she asks.

Will presses his lips together, lifts his eyes, and sighs. "Honestly I'm not sure where that came from either," he murmurs. His brow creases in thought, and he wonders if Hannibal would tell him. "My mother would say they get distracted by their reflection, but mirrors don't have that effect so I don't know why she told me that. My father told me it's about the purity of the metal but iron isn't pure, it doesn't exist in a useable way when it's pure, so I don't know, but it works."

He lowers his eyes and meets hers, finds them dark, ocean-cliffs and storm clouds. "Sometimes you just have to accept that things work and not question why."

She huffs a small laugh, through her nose, and drums her fingertips on the top of the table. Her head tilts, and she looks at him again and Will blinks at her, tries to ignore the subtle glow at her in the light of the sun-cat's stare. Whatever wrong Will has done, it seems to have forgiven him, for its gaze illuminates her like stars and lakebeds, a brilliant off-blue hue that makes him calm. Placid. But she can be a storm as well.

"…I want to ask you something, Will," she murmurs.

Will tilts his head.

"Why are you telling me this now? We've been friends for years and this is the first time you've really mentioned that I should…learn."

Will's brow creases. He blinks, sets his teeth on edge and hides them behind his lips, and then his hands, like they might leap out and bite at her. Winston, at his feet, huffs and curls tighter around Will's ankles, his fur warm and damp from running outside.

Will lowers his hands and hisses, "Because you should *know*." She blinks at him, as though startled by his vehemence. "For God's sake, Alana, you can't just…*wander* the world and expect it to be what you think it is. And even if the Fey didn't exist, people are treacherous, and cold-blooded, and they'll hurt you given half the chance."

She doesn't look angry at his outburst, though her face smooths into something stone-like and clinical. "What happened," she says.

Will freezes. Bites his lip and looks down to his knee. His heels rise up, wanting to flee, and Winston huffs in complaint but doesn't move. Weighing him down – or keeping him grounded. Both. Neither. He drums his knuckles together and winces at the cracking sound his fingers make when they stretch. "What do you mean?"

"Don't bullshit me, Will," Alana snaps, and Will's eyes flash to her and widen. She is glaring at him openly now, a sharp flatness to her mouth that reminds Will of razor wire. "I saw that you didn't eat the food Hannibal gave you, I leave you alone with him for a *morning* and you call me like you're scared out of your mind, begging me to come over and learn all this aether and magic stuff. What *happened*?"

Will flinches, and shakes his head sharply. "Nothing -. Nothing happened. I'm just…"

"Look, Will, I wanted you to see a psychiatrist but if you're going to react like this then -."

"Nothing happened!" Will snaps, slamming a hand down on the table loud enough that his dogs jump, flurrying around him in a snap of movement because they're smart animals and they know that when their master is upset, something is causing it. They nose at his thighs and his hands and Alana blinks at him, before she sighs, and her expression turns deeply sad.

"I'm sorry," she says, and runs a hand through her hair. "I just -. You know how I worry about you, Will."

Will deflates abruptly. He's so tired, he's so *hungry*, for more than just food. He thinks of the flowers in Hannibal's field and aches for the taste of meat in his mouth. His entire body feels cold, like betrayal, the soft slip of knives behind each of his ribs and tugging and he wants, *he wants*, he's famished and thirsty and is this what dark magic feels like? Is this what drugs feel like?

His fingers curl and he rubs his nailbeds over his jaw, corner to chin, then back, shakes his head sharply like there's a fly buzzing at his ear.

Alana watches him, and then she sighs. "Jack called me." Of course he did. Alana has always been Will's unofficial keeper. "He said there was a new body, Hobbs-like in the M.O."

"It wasn't Hobbs," Will whispers.

"How do you know?"

"I saw it." He stands, abruptly, and searches around for his glasses. He might go crazy if he has to look at her aura for another second. He finds them in his coat pocket – but, no, weren't they on the table before? – and unfolds them, sliding them on and sighing with relief.

Alana tilts her head, and nods to his glasses. "Why do you wear those?"

"They stop me seeing too much," Will murmurs, and takes his seat again. "You have to understand, it's like -." He stops, and lifts his eyes, rubbing over his neck. He can feel Hannibal's claws in his skin and his own nails dig in, wanting to scratch, to leave deep furrows and water Hannibal's field with his blood. "The aether is everywhere, Alana. It's here, in this house. It's at the BAU, at the hospital, in every field and forest. And sometimes I can *see* it, unless I have these on."

She blinks at him, and tilts her head. "All the time?"

"All the time," Will replies with a nod.

"Do I…look different, when you're not wearing them?"

Will nods again, and offers her a smile. "The aether can…touch people. Leaves a mark." Like Hannibal's kiss on him – Will hasn't looked in a mirror since that first one, but he's sure there is silver in him now, burned scars and patches of charred flesh where Hannibal's touch landed. He wants to see. He's afraid to see. "Jack doesn't look any different. He's solid as stone."

"Stone can crack," Alana murmurs. "Break at the foundation."

Will sighs, and looks down at his hands. He runs his hands through his hair and sighs again, tapping his heels against the legs of his chair. His thighs tense, release, his shoulders roll up and his head splits in two in a wave of sudden, sharp heat.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you," he tells her. "That wasn't nice."

"No, it wasn't," she replies kindly. "But I understand, and I forgive you."

"I just…. I worry about you too. All the time. I'm so scared one day I'll look at you and see something following you around."

"Well," she says with a smile, "I know the salt and iron trick, now. And you'll tell me if you see anything, won't you?"

Will nods, and doesn't want to say that there might be a time when he isn't looking. Or there might be a time when he can't keep an eye on her. It unsettles the knot of tension sitting against his spine, makes it flex, bones cracking under the python-strength of his anxiety.

Her smile widens, and she reaches out to pat his hand, her expression turning into one of quiet sympathy. "I think you need to get some sleep," she says, and Will doesn't have the energy to fight her. He wonders what her phone would say if she asked it about his wellbeing. Clearly less than twenty percent means he's up and about – the spell needs tuning, needs clear thresholds but he's too tired to work on it right now.

He wants to sleep. He shouldn't sleep. What if he flings himself into the aether again against his will? Would Hannibal, with his anger and cold distance, rescue him again?

He nods, and stands, helping her adjust her coat as she follows suit and heads to the door. She turns, and cups his face in gentle hands, making sure their eyes meet. Behind his glasses, her gaze is soft and mortal, but her eyes are so bright and sweetly pretty; dew on oceanside flowers and blackberry wine in the middle.

He leans in, nudges their foreheads together, and then moves away to open the door. "Text me when you wake up," she tells him. "And maybe, if you're feeling up to it, give Hannibal a call?" She edges the words out, unsure and meek, and Will turns away from her to hide his wince. "He's been a good friend to me and he's really a wonderful person. I think you'd like him if you gave him a chance."

Will swallows, and nods. He doesn't reply.

She sighs, and slides her hands into the pockets of her coat, before she turns and leaves. Will doesn't watch her go, and the door closes behind her, none of his dogs wanting to go out at the moment. He rubs his hands over his face, aching, *aching*, his teeth dry and on edge, his tongue sharp enough to cut the roof of his mouth.

He huffs, and knows he must sleep. But he must do so carefully. He clicks his tongue and Winston rises, tail wagging, and follows Will to the red door. Will takes the knife from the top of the paint can and carves another tic tac toe board onto it, cutting an 'X' into the center square.

Then, he goes down to the basement, forward and back again, and Winston follows with a click of toes. He scatters salt in a large pile, haphazard and without direction, and takes the bag of gems and meat from Winston's collar, only remembering at the last minute that it is empty.

"Fuck," he whispers, and tosses the bag to one side. Winston watches it go, ears perked up and head tilted in question.

Will shakes his head and lays down in the middle of the iron ring. It takes less than a heartbeat for the aether pressure to wrap around his chest, his neck, his thighs, and pull him under. He doesn't fight it. He's too tired to try.

He wakes, in his basement, the air colored teal and lavender, and sits up from the shadow of his body. Winston is next to him, outside the ring, head dropped low in a light doze. The creatures are gathered around the ring, distracted by the salt, and he looks at them. Looks at them, their little bat-like wings, their hunched shoulders, and wonders if he were to pick one up if it would bite him, or still be compelled to count the salt.

He lays back down, sighing heavily. His fingers rub along his nose, edge the frame of his glasses, and he huffs, taking them off and setting them to one side. They will do him no favors here.

He rises again, exhausted to the bone, and makes his way out of the basement and into the main area of his house. The shadows of his dogs are all curled up on their beds, and there's an 'O' in the middle left space next to his 'X'. He shakes his head, smiling, and cuts another 'X' in the bottom left corner.

Then, he goes outside, and freezes in place.

Hannibal is there, his horns rising so high they touch the shadows in the ceiling, his body the same large, black thing it normally is. Around him is gathered a herd of the tiny scorpion-cats, milling around and chasing speckles of sunlight-water, a myriad of colors in their coats. The night-cat's eyes are open, and blink down at Will, though it was day when he crossed over.

Will lets out a plaintive, desperate sound, something clawed from the pit of his stomach at the sight of Hannibal. The creature turns, and looks at Will with unblinking golden eyes.

He smiles.

"I thought you had abandoned me," Will whispers, shaking and frozen in place. Hannibal tilts his head, his smile widening enough to show all of his backlit teeth, and he holds out a hand. Will goes to him, collapsing in place beside him. The white scorpion-cat, the father, is curled up in Hannibal's lap, purring loudly.

"How could I abandon such a sweet friend?" Hannibal purrs, and kisses Will's hand. The brand of his lips is a searing heat, spreading through every vein and artery, and Will shivers and presses close to him. His hands seek, seek strength and warmth, dark magic coating Hannibal like a second skin.

Hannibal tuts, and noses Will's neck. "You are growing weak, darling," he murmurs. "Soon you will not be able to keep me out."

"That's what you want, isn't it?" Will asks, too breathless with relief, too stunned and shivering to make his words sharp. His tongue has softened, his mouth is wet, and the air smells of rosewater and meat flowers.

Hannibal smiles, and does not answer. Will should not let such a monster near his neck. Shouldn't let Hannibal touch him with ownership and fervent love, and yet, and yet -. "You

weaken me," Will says, his eyes closing and it's such sweet relief, not to see anything, to just feel and drag in the waterboard air of the aether into his lungs.

"It is this place which weakens you," Hannibal replies. Will nods. He knows this. "And yet you have returned. Your soul aches, sweet boy. I can feel it in my hands."

His hands, wide and large and clawed, touching gently at Will's exposed wrists and crossed along his thighs. Will wants to open himself up, to tear at his neck and water the whole place with his blood – his lifeforce gives the aether crossing strength. Were he to die, it would live on, and be a place travelers like him could come and go. A place of sanctuary and strength and yet he is so weak.

There are things he must ask. Things he must know.

He turns his head, opens his eyes and stares into the golden glow of Hannibal's. He presses his lips together, swallows, and cups Hannibal's sharp cheek. "I have questions."

Hannibal smiles. "I have answers."

"Will you give them to me?"

Hannibal tilts his head, nuzzling Will's wrist. "Yes," he replies. "For a price."

Of course. Will leans in, desperate to the bone, an animal hunger awakening in him that cares not for food or shelter, only this: the presence and comfort of something that could utterly destroy him, and yet chooses not to.

"What is your price?" he whispers.

Hannibal hums, and turns his head away, forcing Will's hand to fall to his chest. In his lap, the white scorpion-cat sits up, stretches, arches high and feline, and jumps down to join his children in the long grass. The white tracks of car tires shines, and Will's stag stands amidst them, blowing out a heavy breath and tossing its head when Hannibal looks at him again.

"I have told you my desires," Hannibal says slowly, as though tasting each word before he spits it out. Regurgitated, and Will's lips part like a famished baby bird, hungering for its mother's nourishment. "And you have denied me them at every turn."

"You killed a girl," Will growls, and curls his fist on Hannibal's chest. He rises, to his knees, puts his head high and Hannibal's chin lifts, meeting his eyes. "Please, just…just be honest with me. Please don't lie to me."

Hannibal blinks at him, and he turns, both hands lifting to Will's face, his throat, cupping harshly and Will grits his teeth, sucks in a breath, branded and burning and his fingers curl and clench, finding their place on Hannibal's thin wrists.

"You demand honesty of me," Hannibal snarls, and his anger is a brilliant thing, rubies and blood, clotting. "And yet you will not be honest with yourself. What do *you* desire, Will?"

Will tries to shake his head. Can't. He whimpers but Hannibal's grip does not falter.

"I want…to know if you intend to kill again. I want to know how many other debts you mean to collect. I want to know why your sister has been playing games with me, why she wants to come into my sanctuary so badly. I want to know if you're going to devour me when I'm no longer of use to you."

Hannibal hums. Tilts his head.

"Four questions," he murmurs. His claws scrape the sides of Will's mouth, up and under his heavy eyes, dark with circles, restless nights and lack of food. Will trembles. "Perhaps five." He cocks his head the other way, slow tides, cuckoo clocks. He smiles. "I ask of you a kiss, for each one."

Will sags into him, nods frantically. "Yes," he says, begs, tugging on Hannibal's hands. "Please. Please, kiss me."

Hannibal surges to him with a snarl, something animal and predatory that makes Will's heart seize in fear, but then his mouth is on Will's, burning hot, searing them together. Like candle wax, they melt, and Will moans, closing his eyes as Hannibal kisses him deeply, tongue and teeth. For what feels like the first time, Will does not shake.

Hannibal's hands slide down to his waist, haul him close and over until he's straddling Hannibal's lap and Will moans again, desperately clawing at his shoulders. Hannibal's true form is large, Will must tilt his head up and expose his neck to receive the second kiss. It deepens, floods his mouth and his soul, he paws at Hannibal's thick mane of feathers and tugs, earning another snarl.

His hips roll, every inch of him seeking that warmth, contact, that *power*. Oh, *this* is magic, it is dark, flooding him like poison and ash, and Hannibal tastes of rosewater and meat, his tongue curled behind Will's teeth. A third kiss; heat, terrible heat, bringing Will's blood to his cheeks and his stomach, making his hands sharp and rabid.

A fourth kiss, this one so chaste it feels like pain. Will trembles again, stuttering breath and rigid bone, his lips parting on an unsteady exhale as Hannibal pulls from him, threads a large hand through his hair and tugs until Will gasps.

He swallows, shivers, as Hannibal purrs and noses gently at his cheek. "You are beautiful," he breathes. "In all of creation, I have never met one such as you."

"Don't flatter me," Will replies, and again, he means the words to be sharper. His body betrays him, arches and seeks as Hannibal's other hand pets down his back. He leans in, forehead to Hannibal's chin, drags in another breath and tastes ash on his tongue. "I have given you what you want."

Hannibal huffs a laugh, his smile wide and pleased. "That you have, my darling traveler," he murmurs. "And I shall answer. Ask me your questions."

Will licks his lips. "If I brought you to my world, and let you roam as you pleased, how many more people would die?"

"The number is countless," Hannibal replies, and Will growls, upper lip lifting. "I have lived for many years, Will, and you are not the first one who has asked for my help. You are the cleverest, though – the first to truly see what I desired and to offer it to me."

"You sound like the Devil," Will says. "A soul for assistance."

Hannibal hums. "Perhaps."

"Is it all a debt of blood?"

Hannibal nods. "Yes."

Will shivers, for there is no arguing.

"Why does your sister play games with me?"

Hannibal tilts his head, nudging Will until his eyes lift and their gazes can meet. "Because she likes you," he replies with a smile, brushing his claws tenderly over the side of Will's face. "She does not have the power I do – she cannot roam freely, even in the aether, but is bound to this place." He pauses, considering, and then says; "Perhaps she simply finds you interesting."

"She's certainly interested in watching me cross over," Will says darkly. "I think she wants to eat me."

Hannibal laughs. "Perhaps," he replies. "I would not let her."

Will nods, trusting that. "And…when your work is done?" he says; the final question. "When I am of no more use to you, when there only exists you, and me, and no other contracts, what do you intend to do with me?"

Hannibal blinks at him, and smiles wide and warm. He cups Will's chin and tilts his head up.

"I suppose that greatly depends on what your intentions are with me, darling," he replies, his voice a low purr that sends a shiver all down Will's spine. "Perhaps I shall linger, and further assist you in catching rabid dogs. Perhaps you will soften to me, and invite me to stay."

Will closes his eyes and dips his head. His hands flatten on Hannibal's shoulders and spread wide. "I want you to stay," he says. "But I…. We both know what will happen. What must be done to make it happen."

Hannibal hums. "And you believe there is a point where one of us would be unhappy with such an arrangement."

"It's the first thing my mother taught me," Will replies, thinking of the day she left. "Nothing lasts forever."

Hannibal lets out a sound that is distinctly unhappy. He lets Will's face go and sighs, and Will shivers, missing the warmth on his skin immediately.

Then, Hannibal sighs. "You cannot linger here, darling," he murmurs, and pets through Will's hair again. "You are much too weak."

Will winces. "I know," he replies. "But I can't…. I can't sleep." For whenever he tries, he will surely end up in Hannibal's field again, devoured by flowers, and every fiber of his being throws itself at the feet of this creature, this dark Fey that has so effortlessly ensnared him. He should never have gone to that part of the forest – black magic is addictive, everyone knows that.

Hannibal seems to consider this, quietly, and then he cups Will's face and forces his eyes to lift. "Let me help you, then," he says. "I can quiet your mind, soothe that wandering creature that is just now growing teeth." His voice is low, so low, enticing like the promise of a fresh meal and warm bed. Will's lashes flutter, lower, his shoulders falling like heavy snow.

"How?" he whispers, and feels so weak, so young, in Hannibal's arms.

Hannibal smiles. "Is that another question, darling?"

Will answers him in kind, and wraps his fingers around the back of Hannibal's neck. "Yes," he says, and he knows the price. He leans in and kisses, deep, desperate. Hannibal growls and answers him with parted lips and jagged teeth, claws wrapped tenderly into Will's flesh and grabbing, sharply. There is a black storm cloud behind Will's irises, and Hannibal snarls, and curls a hand in his hair, and the darkness overtakes him and drags him under. He gives himself over to it with ash in his mouth and poison in his lungs.

When he wakes again, he is in his basement, and feels warm and rested. Winston lifts his head and woofs at him, and it sounds like a 'Took you long enough'.

Will smiles, yawning the yawn of someone woken from a deep, deep sleep. There is salt and iron and darkness around him, bat-creatures crawling around the floor. One of them look at him, chirps and shows its teeth, and he is not afraid.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

hello my darlings! So sorry for the delay!

There is only this: a man with his mouth split wide, skull cracked in half to show every tooth, tongue hanging limp and long down his throat. There is a girl who cannot see faces, true faces, but too many faces all at once. And through madness and folly and shadow he runs, he runs and his bare feet stumble through mounds of crooked, shapeless teeth, turned soft as butter. He slips on tongues and his hands coat themselves with saliva and blood.

"One of yours?" he asks of the shadows, and they have golden eyes and wide, wide smiles. The white scorpion-cat remains in his home, flitting around the feet of his dogs. Only Winston's eyes follow it, and they sleep curled up together at the foot of Will's bed, a brindle mess of fur speared and split by white light. He thinks of Hannibal, festering in his heart, and dreams of his smile.

There is a girl, with hair the color of straw and a face sagged and puffy like a waterlogged corpse. There is a knife, gleaming wicked and sharp, a dragon's tooth, or perhaps the claw of a monster. Will's sleep is drenched in sweat and nightmares, his body tossing and turning too harshly for the aether to drag him under. He sleeps and does not rest.

There is a girl at the foot of his bed. She floats, and moves like mist. She waves, a broken-bird neck, smiles wide enough to show all of her sharp teeth, and giggles when her little cat, Harper, chases the white scorpion-cat's tail. Will thinks she is the mother of the rainbow glaring. The sun-cat blinks down at him and the clouds are heavy with coming snow.

There is Hannibal, in the aether, and Alana in the mortal world. She calms, and worries, and Hannibal entices, ensnares. Will aches and aches for him, his teeth too dull and his mouth too dry, only wetted with magic and blood and there is a field of broken skulls outside his house. They gather, and rise. Every question grants him another kiss, every favor gives Hannibal another day to collect his dues.

A never-ending cycle, the world-serpent eating its own tail. There are talks, now, of a man called the Ripper, who comes without rhyme or reason and creates the most beautiful displays of macabre art that Will has ever seen. He falls to his knees at the sight of the Wounded Man. Oh, God, how he longs to be pierced like that man is.

There are flowers that grow amidst the skulls. Will bathes in the oils from them, lays himself out in Hannibal's field and watches his cats eat the petals as they grow around Will's thighs.

"Tell me about your mother," Hannibal murmurs, and dangles a single golden vine above Will's eyes. Will reaches for it, and when he touches it, it wraps around his wrist, grows thorns and cuts, and Will whimpers, blood running down his arm. He is strengthening this place. He knows what it means.

"I don't have one," he replies. She died to him the day she left, for he could not find her, in the aether or anywhere else. He was young, back then, and knew not the perils of wandering so far. His father had wept the night Will told him he'd seen her in his dreams, and she was slashed from neck to exposed vulva, bleeding into the place he now calls his home. There is a reason his door is red.

Hannibal hums, and pulls on the vine. It cuts, becomes one with his veins, only to be lit on fire from within and burned away. When Will wakes, he has a scar like barbed wire that brands him. "Everyone has a mother, Will."

"Even you?" Will murmurs. He does not feel pain in this place. Not anymore.

"Even me."

Will screams in his sleep. There is a girl with flaxen hair and old rags. Mischa, perhaps, at an age she is not and never will be. Will wonders why the Fey present themselves the way they do; monstrous, or alluring, so beautiful. Even this half-shade of a girl is beautiful in her own way. The flowers and vines are climbing the walls of his little white house, etched into the rotting siding, caving in the roof. He will die under a wall of them as they fester and feast.

There are no bat creatures anymore. Harper and the white scorpion-cat, whom he has taken to calling 'Chester', have eaten them all.

"Who is she?" he asks Hannibal, when the man with the torn-open skull is brought to him by Jack. "When I try to look through her eyes everything is…blurred. There are shadows and shapes and so many *teeth*."

Hannibal hums, and kisses Will for the price of his answer. It is a sharp thing, and his lips burn anew with each one. Maybe one day he will be black at the mouth, like Hannibal is. "There is a girl," he tells Will, "who asked for the blessing of true sight, such as you have. I gave her this power, but it drove her mad, and now her mind and body suffer the consequences of that knowledge."

Will shudders, and thinks of Alana. It would surely drive her to the same madness, if she were to know, and see like he does. Jack would go insane – such men are not meant to see the world for what it is.

"She is neither living nor dead, now."

"I must stop her," Will says. "I think I can."

Hannibal smiles, and cups Will's face. "You are a beautiful, daring creature, my darling friend. But some madness cannot be cured with kindness, nor reason."

And at that, Will laughs. "Do you think me kind? Or reasonable?"

"I think you try to be kind. But kindness is not the same as reason, no." Hannibal's head tilts, golden eyes flashing in something like amusement. Will can read his eyes, now, and his smile, and even the angle of his tilted head to gauge his mood. Hannibal is not that much different from normal men in that regard, and asks most things in a perma-tilt like the axis of the world. Together, they bask in the blink-dusk of the sun-cat, and Will burns.

"You do not think someone can be both," Will murmurs.

"In my experience with the world of men, kindness is a rare trait," Hannibal says. "Some might see it as weakness. Compassion, wayward and without direction, can be as damaging as cruelty."

Will licks his lips, and bows his head. "Abigail."

"I know your thoughts turn to her. In your dreams."

"I killed her father," Will says. "Gunned him down like a rabid dog. She is an orphan because of me." He lifts his eyes. "Are you jealous?"

"Jealous. Implying there is a threat." Hannibal tilts his head again, tightens his hands. "Is there?"

"Don't hurt her."

Hannibal smiles, wide, wide, wide. "A grave promise," he murmurs. His eyes dip to Will's lap, to his thighs covered by vines and flowers, and then back up, to Will's mouth, to meet his gaze. "I do not think a kiss will satisfy that deal, my darling. Nor would a wander in your world."

Will should not ask. "What would you take from me, to save her life?"

Hannibal growls, and rakes his gaze across Will again. "Oh, I would take all of you," he says, voice a low purr that makes all of Will's bones tremble and tighten. "A life for a life. A body, for a body."

"You would eat me?"

Hannibal shakes his head, purrs, "No, my dear Will."

Oh.

"The Fey do not lay with any but their own," he says, but oh, how he wants. Does he want? *Yes,* yes, his body burns for the touch of this monster and he thinks he would gladly turn to ash under Hannibal's weight. "It is not in their nature to desire that kind of pleasure from mortals. At least, not permanently."

"A conundrum, then," Hannibal says, and smiles. "Tell me about your mother, Will."

"She is dead. I do not have one."

"Don't you?"

The girl's name is Georgia Madchen. She cannot see faces, and killed her best friend for being an imposter. Killed the doctor that tried to cure her. Jack takes Will to her mother and she is a weeping willow, a burned-out oak tree, a sallow and grieving thing that thinks her daughter might as well be dead. Will looks at her through his glasses and sees nothing but grey and white shades, slits of speckled dew and dust and teeth, so many teeth. She has a large mouth, and Will doesn't know how much wider it could get but his fingers clench and he sees himself cutting into her, wanting to try.

There is a red stag standing outside her front door when he and Jack emerge into the light of the sun-cat. It is red as fresh blood, the undercoat black and hanging down as the wings of gutted crows, swamp-witch-like. The ground beneath its feet festers and splits like knives through a tongue, and its horns are as black as Hannibal's. It gazes upon Will from the side of his own stag and blusters, rearing up.

It is a War-beast. The white stag, Conquest. Will's, the black of Famine, and he hungers.

Where is the pale stag? The ghostly visage of Death? Will's fingers curl and he wants to rip the stag to pieces. He shows it his teeth, all on edge, and it grins back at him, wide, wide, fanged as Mischa's smile. The red door does not get a new coat of paint. Will senses they are playing another game, now.

There is a girl at the foot of his bed. She grins at him and crawls atop him, perched on his knees like a skeletal, pale frog. Will looks at her, stares, and she cocks her head and waves at him and he knows who she is.

"How did you get in here?" he asks.

"Carefully," she replies, a teasing trill of birdsong, a Maypole dance of children and colorful silk. "How did you get in here?"

Will smiles. "Carefully."

She laughs.

"I'd like us to be friends, Mischa."

She hums, and stands, and dances on his stomach. She weighs nothing, and her feet barely land, toes brushing the sweat-soaked fabric of Will's shirt. "My brother says we shouldn't trust men, that they are cunning and cruel and will trick us if we are not careful." Will huffs, and rolls his eyes, for is that not the reputation of the Fey? Was there one ancestor, shared by all of them, that zigged left instead of zagging right? One lord chose the land of the aether, the other the land of the living grasses.

She stops, and turns to face him. "He tells me you are honest, and kind. Are you?"

Will licks his lips, and says, "No."

She laughs, head thrown back at the angle of sunrise. "A liar says he is honest. An honest man says he is a liar. Neither of them claim to be kind. Therefore, you are. What a treat."

Hannibal is bleeding him out, coloring his garden with Will's life. If there is enough spilled, another portal will open that will allow Hannibal to come and go as he pleases. Will knows this, and he knows that it is Hannibal's design.

"You are welcome here," he tells her. "But you must still obey the rules."

Mischa hums, and crouches and pets Winston's head. "I like your dogs," she says, and that is all she says. She disappears with a flutter of feathers and another high-pitched giggle.

Will surges to wakefulness with his heart in his throat and his eyes dripping wet. He gasps, and his hair is soaked, his bed wetted down like he has been sleeping in a lake. He is cold, shivering cold, the fever of aether withdrawal burned into his lungs. The air feels too dry, his skin too warm, every part of him trembles.

Buster growls, and stands.

Will freezes, and where the dog is looking is beneath his bed. He swallows, and watches, as Winston looks up as well – his gaze is too-often preoccupied with the scorpion-cats and the bat-like creatures, he does not pay as much attention to living things. But his attention is caught now, and his tail wags, once, and he stands beside his brother.

Then, another of Will's dogs. Addy, her long fur colored brown and white and black. Beside her, Harley, and then another, and another, until they are all standing like soldiers in a firing squad, staring beneath Will's bed.

Will grits his teeth, plants his hands, and throws himself to the floor on his stomach, skating back. There is a girl there, trapped in the darkness, her eyes shining and Will gasps. Without his glasses on, he sees her, sees her, the black mass of ooze and teeth as she stares at him.

He reaches out. "I see you, Georgia," he breathes. She is a trembling shape, formless and venomous, the stench of her like rotted meat and decay. Her forehead bulges with the beginnings of horns, her lips drawn back and very, very pale. "I see you."

She stares at him as the dead often do, unblinking and pale-eyed, and reaches for him with a trembling, skinny hand. "You…see me?" she whispers.

Will nods, breathless, and when he takes her hand so, too, does she take shape, into the visage of a young girl so very, very sick, driven mad by the knowledge of the aether. Their hands touch, and she is waxy with death, so very pale and cold, and Will grips her so tight that all of Hell could not drag her away.

"I see you."

Hannibal stands beside him, as Will watches her be taken away by Jack in a cacophony of blinking red and blue lights. He is unseen, Will knows, yet his presence darkens the sky.

"That was not wise," Hannibal murmurs. In the night, he is merely eyes and teeth. They stand and they watch and Will does not follow Jack away.

Will lifts his chin. "I know your price," he replies, and turns his head. "A body for a body. I will give you mine, if you spare hers."

Hannibal's upper lip curls. "I'm afraid, my dear Will, she was not mine to trade," he replies, and turns his face away from the sight of mortal men to gaze upon Will. Will frowns, and hears a bluster and beat of hooves. The cars run away in an ant-trail of black and red and blue, and behind them, the red stag rears up and gallops in pursuit.

"Therefore, she is not yours to bargain for."

"Who did she belong to, then?" Will demands. "You said you gave her sight."

"I did," Hannibal replies.

Will swallows, and asks, "Who does the red stag serve?"

"She does not have a name in my world," Hannibal murmurs. "Before I came into my dominion, and before much of the aether was formed, she was there. She lives in a place so brilliant with light I cannot touch it."

Will presses his lips together, his fingers flexing. He cannot get the feeling of teeth out of the soles of his feet, and his mouth is heavy, too many of them forming in lines like a shark. "What will happen to the girl?" he whispers.

"She will die," Hannibal replies softly, and Will cannot tell if the concern in his voice is real or not. "The red woman abhors violence. She will not take my involvement, nor the actions

of her ward, lightly." He lifts his chin, and says, "The girl will likely be eaten by flames. The red woman does love her fire."

Will shakes his head, a flare of panic igniting in his chest. "I did not save her just to let her die," he hisses.

Hannibal grins at him. "And that is why, darling, I say kindness can be as damaging as cruelty."

Will grits his teeth, sets them on their edges, and shakes his head like he's ridding his ears of flies. "I cannot accept that," he murmurs, and turns to regard Hannibal fully, under the glow of the night-cat's watchful eye. He is haloed in brilliant moonlight, shining silver on the edges as though lit from every place except his chest. "Can you tell me how to find the red woman?"

Hannibal laughs, like Mischa's laugh, joyous and long. "Oh, my sweet, beautiful friend. I could, if I so desired." He reaches out and Will aches for him, leans into the touch of his hand, his claws curling through Will's hair. Hannibal tugs him forward until their chests collide, until the heat of him obscures all else, and Will shivers. "But she would take you from me, and use you as her own. Why would I allow you to slip from my grasp when you have only just started to love me?"

Love. It is a damning emotion, as fierce and powerful as any blade, any magic, and it is black and poisonous in Will's veins and yet, he cannot deny it is there. It is there, like the slow-sweep of sweat and the stench of the dead.

Will trembles for him, wrapped tight in the arms of a dark, dangerous monster. "If you do this for me," he breathes, "I will give you everything you desire."

Hannibal's eyes flash, glow, brilliantly, sunlight on gold and fired mineral. "Everything," he breathes.

Will nods. "I will fashion you a permanent vessel, and spill all the blood I can in your field, and build you a portal in your domain. I will welcome you into my home, and give you my kisses, and my body, and my love. Freely, for the rest of my life."

Hannibal tilts his head, and gives a considering hum. "You do this all, for the sake of one girl," he murmurs. His thumb brushes along the dark circle beneath Will's tired eye, tilts his head up to show his neck.

"Not just one girl," Will replies. "All of them. All those you hold claim over, and all those the red woman has claimed as well if she sees fit to pardon them."

"Why?"

His exhale is soft as silk, gentle. Will's lashes flutter, dip low.

"You are no savior. No martyr. Why do you offer so much for so little reward?"

"Because I must," Will replies. "Because I am not a monster."

"Ah." Hannibal smiles. "To justify your love for a monster, you must prove you are not one yourself, is that it?" His eyes move away, break Will's tether like the snap of twine, and Will sags against him as Hannibal gazes upon his stag.

"I know what I am," Will says, gasping. The air is too thick, suddenly, the hand of the aether wrapped around his throat, choking him, drawing him in. He wants to fold, wants to feast on wildflowers and meat, endless meat, and the burning ash of Hannibal's love. "I am who I have always been."

Hannibal hums, noncommittal, soft like the wrap of spiderwebs around living flesh. His hand slides through Will's hair, tightens and tugs and pulls Will back to meet his eyes. He leans down, and Will leans up, parts his lips desperately for a kiss and clutches at Hannibal's mane of feathers.

"If I do this for you, sweet boy," Hannibal growls, "and you betray me, I will eat your heart."

Will shivers, and his lungs seize, but he is not afraid. Rather, Hannibal's promise feels like sweet, ardent joy, honey mead and wine on his tongue. He is wet, he is wanting, and he cups Hannibal's face and brings their foreheads together.

"Tell me how to find her," he whispers, "and I am yours."

Hannibal growls again, and pulls Will over the threshold, towards the red door. "As you wish."

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry this took so long, my loves, and that it's a short chapter. I hope you like it!

Will must break the wards around the red door to allow Hannibal inside. He knows he must, he must do this for the sake of Abigail and Georgia and every fawning thing that stumbled their way through the darkest parts of the forest and thought they had escaped with their lives.

Yet, he hesitates.

The power of his home saps at Hannibal's darkness, and now he appears behind Will as a man, with his regal stature and stern features. Will's hand is light on the handle of the door and he stares at the incomplete tic-tac-toe board. He never painted over it.

He trembles.

Hannibal's fingers do not have claws, not anymore, and Will's glasses feel heavy on his nose like manacles around his wrists. "Why do you hesitate?"

Will's eyes close, his head bows, and Hannibal brushes fingers gentle and human along the slope of his spine, and here is where he will melt, turned to butter and ash if he lets himself. His knuckles whiten around the handle. At his feet, Harper chirps and yawns widely.

He confesses; "I am afraid."

"Of her?"

No.

"Of me?"

Yes.

"Time moves differently in the aether," he says, and turns and looks, searches for the gleam of gold in Hannibal's irises but the veneer is too thick, his glasses too steady on his face. He swipes a hand across his forehead and it comes back damp. "What if I don't make it back in time? What do you gain by my failure?"

Hannibal smiles. Even in this world he is toothy, shark-like, and his lashes are low and Will wants to turn into him, wants to sag and sigh and forget everything except the taste of wildflowers and the purr of his cats.

"You believe I wish you'd fail?"

"You lose either way," Will replies. "If I succeed, your contracts are dissolved. If I fail, you lose your means to get into my world, at least for a time."

Hannibal slow-blinks, tilts his head. "My sweet friend," he breathes, "do you think so little of me, that I would simply abandon you? Have I not promised you my help, and my companionship, and my love?"

And he has, he has, given Will such sweet promises like moonshine and bloodstains that color everything Will touches, now. He looks down at his hands, breathes in, breathes out. "Hannibal," he says, and Hannibal replies by stepping closer, until there is nothing but his shadow in Will's peripheral vision. "Why do you want me?"

Hannibal's hand slides up, broad and flat and warm, and settles between Will's shoulder blades. Will's chest tightens, his stomach heaves, his fingers flex and feel clawed but he doesn't shrug the touch away, neither does he lean into it. Outside, the wind has picked up, and the house creaks in protest.

"Because you are mine, my love," Hannibal purrs, and his teeth are at Will's ear and Will feels red, red to the bone, blushing and warm and he turns his head, seeking, burns when Hannibal's lips brush his hair. "And I could never ask for a sweeter, more beautiful, lovelier companion. Because when I first gazed upon you, I knew I would give you whatever you desired. No other has held my loyalty like you have, Will."

Will trembles.

Hannibal's other hand slides in, touches Will's chest, over his heavy-pounding heart.

"You are like no other, Will. A brave, cunning, clever boy, and I wish to utterly devour you."

He is caught, here, like an animal in a trap, and there is no escape. No desire for escape – in Hannibal's embrace, he burns, lit from within, and there are wildflowers in his mouth and vines in his veins, and fire, black fire, lighting up the innards of his skull.

He takes his hand from the door, lifts them to his glasses and slides them off. Lets them fall, and crushes them under his foot. Hannibal's purr is loud, and he rewards Will with a brand, a searing mark that burns through his chest and plants itself, heavy, over his heart.

Will turns in his embrace, lips parted and lifted, and Hannibal kisses him, slams him against the door hard enough to make it creak, and Will's hands go to his shoulders, feel fabric and feathers all at once. Hannibal's claws leave marks in the door by Will's hips.

Hannibal's teeth set themselves to his lower lip. He growls; askance. Will's heart slams against the back of his ribs, grows limbs and claws, crawls upwards out of his chest, into his throat, onto his tongue. Hannibal bites, and sheds his blood, the coppery scent of it sharp like his flowers.

He pulls back, red smeared along the façade of his human mouth, and Will shivers, fingers cold, and touches his lips. Hannibal's eyes cannot hide, not anymore, and they burn a blistering gold, raging embers. Will leans in, cups Hannibal's nape, and licks his lip clean.

Presses his teeth in answer.

Hannibal smiles, wide, wide, wide. He tilts his head, shows Will his neck, and Will snarls, lunging forward, forces his teeth through soft flesh, thin skin. Bites until his mouth floods with ash and tar, bites until he tastes magic and until it burns, blistering his tongue and the innards of his mouth.

He forces his teeth together, swallows heavy and harsh, and Hannibal lets out a sound of pure delight, his claws in Will's hair, on his flank, and the sharp ache of the red door behind his bruised shoulders aches like salt on a wound.

He pulls back, rips his pound of flesh, and swallows it, gasping, covering his mouth so he cannot reject it. His heart recoils, his lungs ache and seize, his stomach clenches sharply. He swallows, feels it settle like a stone, next to Alana's, and closes his eyes.

"Don't betray me," he says, without words. His lips are charred.

"Never, my love," Hannibal replies.

It is mutually assured destruction. Will reaches back, and opens the door. He doesn't let Winston follow as he and Hannibal go downstairs.

There are no more bat-like creatures down here. The cats have eaten them all. Will kneels down, his hands shaking, and he can hear his father's voice in his head, screaming at him *Fool, you're a fool!* He ignores his bag of salt.

Steps over the iron ring, and sits inside.

He looks up to see Hannibal, and in the shadows he is horned and large, towering over Will. Will shivers, and lies down. He does not close his eyes. The aether's touch settles over him, on his hips, on his neck, like Hannibal has covered him and is choking him. Hannibal's hands flex, he lifts his lip in a snarl as Will gasps, and moans, arching up as his body fights against the aether's draw that threatens to pull him under.

But under he goes, down and up again, and then the air is teal and lavender, and he sits up and finds his monster gazing down, all teeth, golden eyes. Hannibal shines in the darkness like oil on water, and crouches down as Will gets to his hands and knees.

He crawls out, collapsing, too weak to stand. Hannibal is there, his large hands cradling Will's face, helping him upright, and Will sags against him, shivering, his face buried in Hannibal's mane of feathers.

"This will be the last time you suffer for my sake," Hannibal promises, and touches Will's hair, and touches his chin, making him lift his head. "I swear it."

"One way or the other," Will replies, and Hannibal smiles, and lets him go, allowing Will to get his own feet underneath him. He must be strong enough for this journey alone, after all.

He looks up and meets Hannibal's eyes. "Tell me how to find her."

Hannibal smiles, and holds out his hand. "Come with me, my love."

Will takes his hand, trembles at the heat of him, and allows Hannibal to lead him back upstairs. His dogs are all shades, whining curiously at the red door as it opens and shuts again, and at the threshold, at the front door, Harper and Chester are sitting. They chirp curiously, scorpion tails twitching, and between them stands Mischa.

She grins at Will, and waves with one clawed hand. "Hello friend!" she says.

"Hello," Will replies with a nod. Hannibal leads him to her, and places his hand in hers. Will frowns, and looks to him.

"Only girls can find the red woman," Hannibal tells him. "Such is her power. Mischa will lead you to her."

Will swallows, and tries not to feel afraid. Mischa squeezes his hand and grins at him, wide enough to rival the victims of Georgia, and Will swallows again, and touches his mouth with his free hand.

"Mischa," Hannibal says, and crouches down before his sister, taking her face in a loving touch. "You must look after him for me."

Mischa nods. "It's like a game!" she says when Hannibal releases her, and she grins up at Will. "Hide and seek. It's one of my favorites."

Will manages a weak smile. He feels dizzy, starving, and he squeezes her hand because he is sure if she lets go, he will collapse. "Will you be here when I come back?" he asks Hannibal, because he cannot allow himself to part from him now without that promise. Hannibal's flesh burns in his stomach, his kiss is poisonous, and when Will looks down, his fingertips are black with his own blood.

Hannibal cups his face, and draws him into a kiss – such is the price for a question, and Will burns for it, arches and seeks and whines when they part.

"I swear," Hannibal says. His claw tucks beneath Will's chin, lifts his gaze, and he smiles. "Go do what you must, my sweet friend. I will be here when you return."

Will nods, and Mischa tugs on his arm, leading him away from the house and towards his stag. She jumps onto its withers and grins down at him. "Come on, up!" she says, gesturing for him to join her. Will blinks, frowning. He has never ridden his stag through the aether before, but there's no denying that he is far too weak to walk. His stag blusters at him, and

tosses its great head, before it kneels to one foreleg, and Will climbs on, settling behind Mischa as the stag rights itself.

He hears a roar, from far away, and turns to see the red stag watching them, feet on the horizon and horns in the clouds. Mischa lets out a high-pitched, child-like cry, and the red stag rears up, crowing for them again.

"Go, go!" Mischa cries, and kicks Will's stag's flanks. The animal growls, turns so it's facing the right direction, and runs.

Time moves differently in the aether, but even still, Will cannot pretend to know for how long they chase the red stag. The sun-cat goes to sleep, and its cousin rises, and then they swap places again many times. They skirt the edges of the wide, wide forest, and Will has never ventured this far before. When he was younger, it was into the bayou and swamps of his backyard, and now, here, he has only gone into the trees, into the light place and the dark place and the very dark place, now.

The tree line stretches on at his side, endless, the forest is endless, and it seems like they are no closer to the red stag than when they started. He has one arm around Mischa, the other buried in the thick coat of feathers around his stag's neck, clinging on barely with his heels dug in, and every four-paced beat of the stag feels like another weight on his shoulders, dragging him down, though the animal does not falter for a single second.

There is darkness, the kind of darkness that comes in the middle of an open field – a boundless void, cold, without motion. Will trembles, shivering, and turns his face downwards where gravity tells him the floor is. Beneath his hands, when he presses flat, he feels not earth, not stone. Sand, frozen and sticking together damply. His fingers curl and he moans, and grimaces, and tries to get his knees under him.

"Will!" That's Mischa's voice, far-off and distant, and Will groans again, trying to reach out to her, but all he feels is sand. He opens his eyes and blinks, rapid-fire, sets his teeth on edge and bares them and beneath him is a beach, a long pale line of yellowish sand that glitters brilliantly as though lit by fallen stars and speckles of dead moons.

He looks up, finds himself facing a sheer cliff, a different kind of black than the nothingness around him. The air looks like a child painted it, it is without texture or definition. There are no clouds, and yet he can see the sandy shore, see where it extends outwards in all directions. A desert, then.

The cliff is dark, and above it shines the two pale eyes of the night-cat. Will flinches, lifting his hands to shield his eyes, and he hears the cries of birds – gulls, raucous and echoing, and

the trills of songbirds, the squawk of parrots and vultures.

He does not know this place, and the foreign feel of the air grates on his skin. He cannot see Mischa, or his stag, as he pushes himself upright and gazes up, and up. The night-cat blinks down at him, and there is a rumble like a great purr.

"Where am I?" he asks it.

In answer, the night-cat blinks again, both eyes disappearing into the void of black. The glitter in the sand shines in the absence of its light and Will looks down, and he sees, stretching in front of him, two sets of footprints in the sand. One of them is much smaller than the other, both bare. They stop right at his shoes.

He crouches down and takes his shoes off, then his socks, and the sand grits against the bare soles of his feet but it has always been easier to navigate the aether barefoot. He takes a tentative step forward and finds the larger set of footprints matches his step exactly.

The footprints lead right up to the cliff, and it stretches up above him as a towering pillar, the rock sheer. He reaches out and touches it, flattens his hand, and it thrums like the softening chord of a guitar, strings vibrating against his palm.

The night-cat opens its eyes, and beneath its eyes, stars twinkle into existence, and form a smile.

Will grits his teeth, and sinks his nails into the cliff. It bends beneath his nails which feel like claws, turning butter-soft, and he presses his other hand, until he finds a good grip and it turns solid again. He lifts one foot and does the same with his toes, and starts to climb.

Chapter 10

Will does not know how long he climbs for. The mountain seems vast, stretching up and up and up. His hands shake and spasm, wanting to release the rock even as it molds for him. His thighs barely have strength for him to lift his leg and dig his foot into the next hole. Though the aether is neither hot nor cold, and has no temperature, he is sweating, so much he can barely see, but dares not release the mountain to wipe at his eyes.

He grits his teeth, rubs his forehead against his bicep, breathes out. He simply must keep going – he is weak, his stomach aches with hunger and his lungs are seizing, and perhaps the air is too thin up here, but he has to go. If he falls, he falls, but he will not have the strength to make this climb twice.

He hears, above him, shrieks of birds, too numerous and varied to count. He shivers, feels their shadows swoop over him, hears them crying in some discordant song. "Come on," he whispers to himself, and doesn't look up. He reaches, blindly, grabs as far up as he can, pushes with shaking limbs and groans, helplessly. His lungs burn as he heaves another breath, collapses against the cliff face. Sobs, and slams his fist against the side of it.

"Fuck!" he yells. He should have waited, until he was stronger, but Georgia might not have that kind of time. Certainly, Hannibal's contracts don't have that kind of time. He must try, he *must* keep going, because he cannot sell himself to Hannibal twice. He cannot come back here, and he can't leave until he has spoken to the red woman.

He climbs another step, looks up at a flutter of wings. It looks like a woodpecker, vaguely, but its eyes are far larger than the average bird, and it has long, drooping tail feathers like that of a peacock. It alights on the cliffs just above his highest hand, tilts its head and eyes Will curiously.

Screeches, and has sharp teeth in its beak.

Will flinches, grits his teeth, and presses on.

He climbs, and climbs, and when it feels like he cannot move another inch, he forces himself to go again. He thinks this is the kind of dogged hunting behavior Jack would appreciate – he likes the idea of men working themselves to the bone to get their killer, or get their job done. Will breathes out, and his ribs feel brittle and dry, like if he holds too much air he will simply crack like an eggshell. But the air here is expansive and light, and Will cannot take it all in, it's too much.

He looks up, and whimpers, as he sees another set of birds looking down at him. He sees the curve of their wide, flat feet. They are pink, like flamingoes, but shaped like vultures. And they are sitting on something.

The ledge.

He digs his nails into the cliff, hauls himself up, and the birds scatter with a raucous series of cries as Will manages, finally, to reach the top. He folds his arm over it, groans, shoves with his feet and kicks like a child at the edge of a pool, claws his way onto the top of the cliff and rolls, to his back, blinking up into the night cat's giant white eyes.

The stars smile at him. There is a cold breeze up here, blowing despite the fact that no such thing exists in the aether. Will groans, rubs at his ribs to try and force them back into place, petting down his aching stomach. He's *starving*, and shaken to the bone, a deep, deep chill set in him from the wind, cutting through his sweat and open pores, his panting mouth. His exhale mists above him, only to be pulled away.

There are birds – doves, wheeling above his face, glistening like diamond. Peacocks, colored like marble and radiant. Will rolls to his side, shivering, and sees a shining pool that looks like liquid silver, and from it, pelicans are drinking, filling their sagging chins with the metal and forcing it out through their skin so they are painted and shining. Next to them, vultures, some red, some pink, an array of blood-like plumage, savage-looking black beaks and eyes that stare at Will a little too sharply.

Some birds are clearly other, ravens that are made of starlight and cardinals of gold. Birds that have no recognizable shape; legs of storks, heads of owls, two sets of wings. They all come and go, free-wheeling around this pool, drinking from its silver shores.

Will's mouth aches, his lips are dry, but he cannot drink. Even if it were safe for him, whoever owns this pool would demand recompense, and Will has none to give.

So he groans, rubs his hands over his eyes, and pushes himself to his knees. As he does, the birds shriek, and then there is a bright flash of light. It blinds even the night-cat, who shuts its eyes and turns away. Will flinches, covering his face, and looks up only when the flare fades, becomes a single shooting star, that falls into the pool of silver.

Will hears a girl, screaming.

A hand reaches up from the pool, burned to a crisp and black. It claws at the edge of the pool, a melted skull following. The girl screams, and Will falls back, scrambling to the edge of the cliff as the skeletal, black-boned figure rises from the pool. The silver coats her, her ragged-clinging clothes, the shards of flaxen hair.

Will swallows, and whispers, "Georgia?"

Her head snaps towards him, and she touches what's left of her face. There are still parts of skin, clinging, the rest burned away. She screams. "Help me, help me!" But Will cannot help her, even if he knew how. The silver touches her at the ankles, rises up her legs like Hannibal's flowers cling to Will, seeking to dissolve her, to devour her.

Will can merely sit, and watch it happen.

The silver water drags her back and Will shakes his head, runs his hands through his hair, watches as it coats her arms, eats into her face. Finally, fills her mouth, and her screams go silent – then, suddenly, turn into the delicate coo of another dove.

Georgia is dragged into the pool, and from it emerges another bird in a bright burst of flame, and Will sobs, pressing his hands to his mouth, as he watches her flutter her wings, blink at him, and then rise to join the others.

He cries, knowing that he just saw her die, and his skull is too brittle, too delicate in this place. His sobs wrack his lungs, make him feel like shards of glass are embedded between each bone. He buries his face in his hands, so tired, so defeated, so *cold*.

Then, there is light again. It is so bright that Will dares not move his hands. Fingers brush, gently, through his hair.

"What's this?" The voice is vaguely female, fed through years and ages of magic, of static, so that Will does not hear it, but feels it pierce directly into his heart. "How came you to this place?"

Will swallows, runs his nails down his neck. Flinches, when it hurts. "I had help," he replies.

A hum. Will reaches out and only touches wisps of smoke, but they are warm. The woman gasps, and her touch moves away.

"What is your name?" she demands, hard as ice on oceans, crushing ships with her chill. Will trembles, wraps his fingers around his arms, winces at the brightness burning into the backs of his eyelids. If he tries to look, he will surely go blind. "Who are you?"

"You may call me 'Will'," he says, for he is not a fool, and she is still one of the Fey, after all. "And you? What way I call you?"

There is a pause, and then the woman's heat returns. She touches Will's face and forces Will's chin up. "Oh, my sweet boy," she says, and sounds like she wants to weep. "Where are your glasses?"

Will frowns. "I broke them."

"Why?"

"I didn't need them anymore."

The woman tuts, much like a scolding mother. Her hands are gentle, and feel very small on Will's face. They pet over his mouth, across his hands, to his neck, to his hair. "You shouldn't have broken them, baby," she says. Will's brow furrows, his lips part, but his mouth is too dry to speak. "They were a gift. They protected you."

Will's head is too warm, heated by her touch, expanding and puffed up, ready to burst. "Who are you?" he demands.

She sighs, and the sound is sad. "Don't you recognize me?" she whispers. Will shakes his head, bares his teeth, unconsciously aware that she is leaning closer. "Oh, baby, don't be afraid. I would never hurt you."

A pair of warm lips touch Will's forehead, and Will gasps as the bright color of his eyelids abruptly falls away.

"Open your eyes."

Will does, cautiously, first looking through his lashes, then blinking rapidly when he is not immediately blinded. He shivers, bites his lower lip, looks to the side of him to see a robin perched on his knee, eyeing him curiously. The bird itself has black instead of brown, but the red breast is unmistakable. Will wonders what it used to be, what poor, wretched soul is now trapped behind that beady gaze.

He hears a laugh, and then a pale hand appears, and the robin hops into its palm. It is vaguely female, without sharp edges, like impressionist art, and Will watches a second hand come forward, petting down the robin's back. The woman coos, and lifts it to her face. Will watches, watches and sucks in a breath.

She's beautiful. Of course she is. Her eyes are big and blue, shimmering like sea stones. Hair falls around her face in dark brown waves, covering her bare shoulders, her exposed breasts. Her skin is not white, but pale, the soft color of not-quite-yellow daffodils, and yet her mouth – her mouth is red and fanged, and Will watches as she kisses the robin's cheek, and giggles, exposing her sharp teeth.

Then, she lets the robin go with a flick of her wrist, and her eyes land on Will.

"Who are you?" he breathes, but he knows, he knows. Even after so many years, even without that terrible wound she had been given when last he saw her, there is no mistaking the similarity; the hair, the eyes, the strong jaw and pretty smile. Even half-dead, even now, he would recognize his own mother. She has a deep set of scars running from her neck to between her legs, healed. Will thinks they look like claws – sees, clear as day, a fight between her and some big, dangerous thing.

Her eyes lower to his mouth, and she sighs, and takes his hands in hers. They are so very small, smaller than he remembers her being, but he's much bigger than he was back then. Her fingers curl around his wrists and Will sees, sees that his skin has turned black. Sees that Hannibal has touched him, affected him in ways he couldn't see before. Without his glasses, brought to the very edge of reason and reality, he can see clearly, finally.

"Oh, my sweet boy," she whispers, and touches Will's face. Her eyes well up, shimmering, and tears of silver spill down her cheeks. "I wish I could have saved you from him."

He swallows, shows his teeth, yanks his hands away. "I don't need saving," he hisses. He is not strong enough to stand, nor to push her away. More tears fall, and she gives him a helpless look. "You're the one who's hurting little girls."

"Hurting them? No!" she says, and stands, gesturing to all of her birds. "I'm saving them."

"Don't lie to me," Will snarls, clenching his black fists. Perhaps his mouth is stained, too, ash and charcoal. Good – he hopes it sours her little silver pool. He hopes the light in her dies out completely in his darkness. "I saw what happened to Georgia. I tried to help her."

At that, the red woman's eyes grow cold. Will can't remember her name – isn't that strange? Surely he'd remember his own mother's name. "You know so little and speak as if you know so much," she snaps. Then, her eyes flash. "He has poisoned you, turned you against me."

Will lifts his chin.

"You are so weak, my baby," she says, and starts to weep again, helpless, hopeless. She kneels in front of Will, tugs on his hands. "Come, drink from the water here. It will help you."

And Will wants to go – despite the unnatural look to it, he registers absently that it will help him. He can feel the energy of it, the life and magic, soaking into his skin like water through dirt. He could bathe in it, and his bones would turn to metal, his skin to stone, and he would be strong. Oh, he'd be so strong, just like her.

He blinks, and jerks his hands back. "No," he growls. This is what Hannibal warned him about – she is trying to trick him, to lure him into her dominion so that she can exert control. "I'm not here to drink. I'm here to bargain."

"Bargain," she repeats, growling. "Whatever for?"

"I want you to release your girls," Will says. "Hannibal has agreed to dissolve his contracts." She blinks, head tilting, and bites her lower lip. Hard enough, her sharp teeth sink in, create little rivulets of blood that run down her chin.

"That monster really agreed to stop?" she whispers, and Will nods. She laughs, and shakes her head. "I don't believe you."

"I've bound him to me," Will replies. Her eyes snap to his, widen, so much that they take over most of her face, and give her an odd, insect-like appearance. "And I am bound to him. He swore he would stop. He will stop, once I ask him to."

His mother's eyes narrow. Above them, the night-cat has returned, and the stars have formed a batting paw, and it's playing with the swoop of her birds. So, too, does this feel like a chase of cat and mouse, and Will is waiting with baited breath to see if she will crawl close enough for him to lunge.

"What will I receive, for all my little birds?" she finally asks.

Will swallows. "Is there anything I can give you?"

Her lips purse. She hums, and Will shivers, a tremor running through him. He's so tired, so weak, and watching the night-cat is making him dizzy.

"Please," he says, and lifts his eyes. "Please, I don't have a lot of time."

She sighs, and looks sad. Kneels down and pets through his hair, cupping his face. "My sweet boy," she says, and Will flinches, and wonders how she can still claim him as anything of hers. "I am so sorry, for what I have had to do." Her head tilts. "You understand, don't you? I could not live there permanently. Your father was not strong enough to sustain me."

Will knows this. He knows, conjures the sickly image of his father. The doctors said he had liver cancer, but Will doesn't think liver cancer affects the brain like that. He was crazed by the end of it, and wouldn't stop speaking of birds and silver fountains. Now, Will knows why.

"I'm strong enough," he says. "I just have to get back. I need an answer, now."

She hums. "I will give you one," she replies, and stands. "I will release my birds into the wild, if my son breaks the bond with that monstrous trickster."

Will frowns, flexes his fingers, looks up as she meets his gaze. The coldness has returned, and Will shivers. She gives him a look that is almost kind. "I know you hesitate," she whispers, and turns to him again. "That is because he has deceived you, my sweet boy. He has tricked you, somehow, and I shoulder the blame for that, for I could not teach you what you needed to be taught before you were lost to me."

Will grits his teeth, tries to shake his head. None of it makes sense, and he doesn't care about her excuses, doesn't care that she left – that is an old wound, and closed up long ago. But now she's trying to break him away from Hannibal, and Will can't allow that.

He won't allow that.

"What will happen, if I break the bond?" he asks.

"Any Fey who tries to bond with a human loses their life, as forfeit, if the human rejects them," she replies. "It is a promise most sacred, and that betrayal burns us to the foundations. There is no recovery – if he survives, he will be less than a shadow, and will do you no more harm."

Will nods. He swallows. "Release your birds," he says, "and I will break the bond."

She smiles, widely, and from the starlight she pulls a string, and from that string, a goblet forms, shining steel. She turns around and kneels, filling the goblet with her silver water, and rises. Her birds all take wing, one by one, shrieking with freedom. She smiles up at them, waves a goodbye, and then looks at Will.

Holds out the goblet. He takes it.

Hesitates. She steps closer.

"Does it matter who initiated the bond?" he asks.

She frowns, tilts her head, brows coming together in a sharp crease. "Why do you ask?"

Will sighs. Shrugs. "I guess it's not important."

"Will!" she shrieks. "Why do you ask?"

But it's too late. Will tips it back, chokes on metal that is surprisingly warm. It clogs his throat, coats his insides, and his chest spasms sharply, rejecting this thing that is not food, is not water. He gasps, dropping the goblet, and tries to breathe in. The metal leaps into his lungs, eager to plug him there, too.

"No! No, no, what have you done?" she cries, falling to her knees beside him. Will rolls to his side, laughs as she pets through his hair. His lungs burn, his mouth burns, his hands – his hands are lit from within, with silver moonlight and black flames; her influence, and Hannibal's, fighting for control.

In his stomach, the hard knot of Hannibal's flesh pulses, grows teeth. Inside his brittle skull a monster snarls, paces, and there is a silver eagle and a black stag rearing at each other, fighting, set alight. Will laughs, and laughs, as his ribs break and spear his lungs, as his stomach tightens and his body convulses.

"What have you done?" she screams, and Will closes his eyes, laughs harder until there is no more air. "Will!"

Will coughs, and the shine of his blood is brilliant and stark, spilling from his throat, coating his teeth. The night-cat blinks, shrouding them in darkness, and he hears his mother sobbing. He doesn't care.

Will wakes to heat, and knows immediately that he is no longer in the aether. He is smothered, burrito'd in blankets, and there's a warm weight at his side, the scent of which tells him is one of his dogs. Another, across his thighs, another on his ankles. He can hear them breathing, and stirs, groaning.

"Hush." A gentle voice soothes him, and he feels a warm, wet cloth pressed to his forehead. Will turns into it, untangles one arm to paw gracelessly at the hand. He opens his eyes, lashes fluttering, and sees Hannibal – human Hannibal – kneeling beside his mattress. Hannibal smiles at him, his eyes dark, shining with adoration, and he cups Will's cheek and shushes him again. "Be still, darling. You are very weak."

"What happened?" Will rasps, and coughs immediately. He feels like he was struck by a train – every muscle is bruised, every bone feels weak. His head is pounding and he's hungry, starving to death. It feels like only the weight of his dogs is keeping his soul inside his body.

Hannibal sighs, through his nose. "You did a very reckless thing," he murmurs. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

That, at least, makes Will smile.

"You must rest," Hannibal coaxes, and dabs at his forehead with the warm cloth again. Will shivers, giving a soft sound of protest. "I will take care of you."

Will sighs. "I don't want to wander again," he murmurs. "I can't. Will you help me sleep?"

He turns his head, because he knows the price of questions. Hannibal smiles, and leans down, his fingers warm and gentle on Will's face. He kisses once, and a second time, before he takes the cloth away and rests their foreheads together.

"Sleep, my beloved Will," he whispers. Will's already half-gone. "I will tell you everything when you wake."

Chapter 11

He slides through fever dreams: wildflowers, their thorns biting into his hands and skinning him as he sits and chokes on the scent of meat; black flames that leap up high all around him; a purr, like a great many cats are sitting inside his skull, only to scatter at the raucous call of a silver hawk. He dreams of Hannibal, black and horned, and knows even as he slides between realms and realities and streams of consciousness that Hannibal is with him.

A nick in his arm, and a soothing voice whispering, "Sleep, darling." Plastic touching his nose, he snorts and pulls away, but can't dislodge it. His hands are bound in vines and claws. The plastic sits below his nostrils, forces air into his lungs. It's too cold, dry, and he whimpers but cannot wake enough to free himself.

His skin feels no claws, no burn of magic. He floats, then bows, sinking beneath ocean tides only to gasp for air when his body surges and convulses. Before he knew he could walk between worlds in his sleep, doctors had said he had terrible sleep paralysis, and mustn't sleep on his back. A weight presses down on his chest and he gasps, moaning weakly, seeking, seeking…

A warm hand touches his forehead, which is slick with sweat. A hum, and the giggle of a young girl. Hannibal and Mischa, he assumes. He had wondered what became of her. His brain either has no knowledge of how he got from the cliffs to here, or hides it from him. The moments or days or hours between drinking silver and waking in his home are a vast stretch of darkness that not even the sun-cat's eyes can penetrate.

Through it all, Hannibal is there. He knows this, like the directions of the compass and the sounds of his dogs breathing. Fever spreads through him, and his gut aches with hunger, and his nose and throat is so dry, and yet he does not eat, does not drink, and does not die.

Part of him wants to. To slip into the quiet of the stream and simply let the current take him. He must murmur such things, for whenever he does he feels a sharp stab of pain in his abdomen, and hears Hannibal snarling that he must remain, he must. Hannibal has his soul, his body, in his claws, and will not let such a prize go so easily

When Will finally wakes, it is to the scent of food. Rich, salty broth, and the scent of meat – chicken, if he were to guess. He hears plates clinking and moans, rolling his head to one side. His hands are still bound, secured with what he realizes are not vines, but leather cuffs, keeping them by his hips.

The clinking pauses. "Will?" It's Alana's voice. He slits open his eyes and winces at the world.

"Hannibal! He's awake!" she says, and rises, collapsing to her knees beside his mattress. Her hand is warm, delicate, as she pets over his forehead. A shadow moves, prowling in Will's periphery, and his eyes sharpen on Hannibal's human shape. He whines as Hannibal kneels beside him, checking his pulse with two strong fingers against his neck. He tries to turn his head, but Hannibal's touch pulls away, pressing to his cheek instead.

"His fever has broken," he says. Alana sits back, and Will blinks, sees an IV bag hanging above his head, close to empty. Feels the stick of bandages around his stomach. He winces, sucking in a breath, but can't do much before he starts to cough.

"Here." Alana tucks a hand behind his head, lifting it, and presses a cool glass to his lips. "Drink."

Will parts his lips, swallowing a mouthful of water, before he grimaces and turns his face away. She lets out a worried sound, but doesn't force him to drink, and gingerly pulls the breathing tubes from his nose when it seems like he's able to breathe on his own.

Hannibal unfastens the cuffs, and pulls Will upright, cupping his face and looking between his eyes. Then, he smiles. "Welcome back, Will," he purrs, his touch gentle. Will blinks at him, brow furrowing.

Something feels wrong. Off-center, like trying to watch a 3D movie without the glasses. His glasses – he broke them. But the world should look different without them on. He should be able to see Hannibal's horns, be able to feel the magic seeping into his skin. He can't, and without that feeling he suddenly has the sensation that his skin is too tight, too dry. His teeth, too sharp.

"I can't…" He looks around, bats Hannibal's touch away. He sees his dogs. Sees Alana. She looks different, too, beautiful as always, drawn with worry, pale in the sunlight. It crawls in through the open blinds, illuminates Will's dining room table atop which sit two steaming bowls of soup. Glasses of wine. Hannibal fed her, *again*.

He clears his throat, and everything feels *wrong*. It's too much, like suddenly being crammed into a stall after so long in open pasture. He bucks against the feeling, claws at the IV dug into his elbow, tries to scratch at his bandages and growls when Hannibal stops him.

"I'll put the cuffs back on," Hannibal says, low with warning. "Be still."

Will obeys, reluctantly. He's not strong enough to fight Hannibal off.

Alana offers him water again, but he shakes his head, turning his face away. "Will, you have to drink. And eat, if you can. Please."

Will shakes his head again, vehemently, pushes her and Hannibal away and looks down at his hands. They aren't black, not anymore. The stark white of the bandages around his abdomen hides a deep, clawing pain. He feels like his stomach has been ripped out.

"What happened?" he demands, voice weak and snarling, hoarse with disuse. He looks at Hannibal. "What the fuck happened?"

Hannibal presses his lips together, his eyes on Alana. "Alana, would you mind taking the dogs out while I speak with Will?" he asks. She nods, pallid with concern, but stands and calls for the dogs, taking them all outside.

The door closes, and Will reaches for him, gripping him tightly. "I can't see," he says, and the panic is rearing up now, clogging his throat and choking his lungs. "I can't see you, I can't see the, the aether. What happened?"

Hannibal's eyes drop to his stomach. He cradles Will's wrists and doesn't ask for a kiss as payment for the question. Will aches, deeply, his mouth too cold, his hands twitching and flexing as though he is being moved by a puppeteer who's tangled the strings.

"The red woman poisoned you," he breathes, and meets Will's eyes. They are amber, and gold, and hold flecks of red like dried blood. Not like his real eyes at all – still beautiful, of course, but *wrong*. Will swallows. "Her fountain latched onto the piece of me you kept inside of you, and tried to burn it out." His inhale is shaken, his exhale weak. "By the time Mischa brought you to me, you were close to death. So I had to carve it out of you, but the poison had spread so far that…"

Will gasps, and even that sounds false in his head. He doesn't feel like himself, the cling of magic that has always been sitting in the back of his head is gone, utterly torn to pieces, and he kneels amongst the shards like a wretched thing, writhing and moaning for some miracle to put it all back together.

"She wanted me to break our bond," he whispers. Hannibal nods, and looks so utterly sad. "She released all her birds, so that I would do it. But she…" He swallows, thinks of the taste of blood and silver in his mouth, and shudders, eyes dropping. "She panicked, when I implied I was the one to make it happen. I sought you out, I allowed us to…join." He winces. "She knew you. She hated you. She wanted you to die."

"I know," Hannibal whispers.

"Did you know this would happen?"

"No, darling, I swear," he says, and his fingers tighten, and Will believes him. "I feel as though I am looking at a shadow of you, now." Will flinches, remembering his mother's words. It is what might have happened to Hannibal, if things were different.

"What does this mean?"

"I'm not certain," Hannibal confesses. "But I will take care of you. I will feed you, and see you back to full strength. Perhaps, with it, your magic will return."

"But what if it *doesn't*?"

Hannibal swallows. "Our contract is secure," he says, for that is the only way the Fey know how to reassure. "You are mine, and I am yours. If you cannot join me in my home, then I will come to you. I will stay here, with you."

Will grits his teeth, wincing, and shakes his head, thinking of his mother again. "You can't," he says. "I'm not strong enough to hold you here. I can't make you a permanent vessel, I can't give you what you need to survive."

"There are ways," Hannibal says, and Will wants to ask what they are, but he's tired. He's so tired, and everything feels too raw on his skin, except for where Hannibal is touching him, always gentle. He misses the burn of his claws, misses his fangs, longs, desperately, to see him as he should be seen. "You have given me enough power to remain for a long while, my love. My field grows thick under you, my cats feast on the flowers your blood has reaped." He lets go of Will's arms, cups his face instead, and sighs. "I will not be parted from you."

Will wants to trust in that, despite everything he knows telling him it's impossible. Or, at least, not sustainable.

"Will you let me feed you, my love?" Hannibal whispers. Will swallows. "Please. Let me take care of you, and strengthen you, and fill you in every way I can. You've awoken a dark devotion in me, Will; I cannot accept your refusal."

Will laughs, though it's shaky, weak, and ends with a cough. "Then I have no choice," he replies. He aches, so desperately. He lifts his head. "Kiss me," he whispers, "and seal our bargain."

Hannibal smiles widely, showing his teeth – not fanged, but imperfect and sharp nonetheless. Will shivers at the sight of them, and leans in as Hannibal does. Their mouths meet, and there is no fire, no dark thread of magic coiling into Will's stomach and seizing his spine, but it's warm, and gentle, and feels good nonetheless.

He breathes out shakily when they part, gasping for air that is too dry and too thin for his lungs. "Don't leave me," he begs, clutching at Hannibal's coat. "Ever."

"I swear it," Hannibal replies.

Alana returns, and though Will instinctively recoils at the idea of Hannibal feeding either of them, he accepts what's left of her soup, and then Hannibal's. It's hard to eat, and he does so with his eyes closed, wanting to block out the desperately wrong feeling of the real world as it touches his skin. His stomach hurts, a reminder of the sharp wound Hannibal gave him, and Alana tells him that she hasn't been able to get text messages from her stone for a while.

"I threw it up," Will lies. It is more likely Hannibal carved it out of him as well. "We can try again later."

Hannibal gives him something to help him sleep, and he does, without dreams, either real or other. Trips to the aether have always drained him, and this one may have taken his life. He is weak, and allows Hannibal to place another IV in his arm to give him nutrients. Lets Hannibal hold him, once Alana leaves, giving himself in the way of heat and strength as Will wafts to and from the realm of consciousness.

He does not see the cats, does not even feel the all-knowing gazes of the sun-cat or night-cat when they come. He knows they are there, because just because he can't see it doesn't mean

it's not there, but he does not feel their warmth, their light. He feels nothing, nothing and too much all at once, and he shivers and sobs and tries to claw at his stomach until Hannibal secures the cuffs around his wrists again, and he cannot do it anymore.

Hannibal remains with him. He feeds Will, and bathes him with warm towels wet with sweet-smelling water that reminds Will of honey and jasmine. He moves Will to and from his bed so he might change the sweat-damp sheets, and pets him when he shakes, and murmurs unending words of love, of devotion, of sweet sacrament whenever Will is lucid enough to understand them.

The betrayal aches, deeply, for how could his mother want to rip him away from such a creature?

"She and I have met before," Hannibal confesses to him one night. "One of her birds came into my claws, and she fought me for her."

Will trembles, and says, "She still has the scars from it."

Hannibal doesn't smile, but seems remarkably pleased by that nonetheless.

Will eats, and drinks, and lets Hannibal care for him. He knows what is happening, even if he can't feel it – he is becoming indebted to Hannibal, far beyond any mortal before that did not find themselves, eventually, stuck in the aether with the Fey they bonded to. But he seeks this out like a homing beacon, desperate every time he opens his eyes and finds Hannibal, still human, still mortal, without horns and claws and fangs. He can't even feel them, where they should be, and when the shadows come they reveal nothing but skin and flesh of a man.

He can't feel it, but he knows he is Hannibal's now, utterly and completely. There is not a single part of him that Hannibal has not touched.

Hannibal unbinds him, after another long while, and unwraps the bandages from his stomach. There is a scar, there, stretching from one side of his abdomen to the other. He whimpers when he sees it, and Hannibal sighs, pressing his mouth over the raised, pink line.

"The poison was extensive," he murmurs. "I had to take out so much of it."

"I wish you hadn't," Will breathes.

Hannibal's eyes flash, and turn black with anger. "No more talk like that," he demands, and kisses Will fiercely enough to bruise. "If you dare allow death to take you, I will hunt you through every afterlife there is and bring you back."

Will laughs, though it's weak. "I know."

"She told me…she told me she wished she could have saved me from you," he breathes, one night, when the lights are low and they are merely together, entwined and warm beneath

blankets. "How did you know her?"

Hannibal smiles. "I chased her," he murmurs, petting through Will's hair. "When we fought, I followed her, and saw her appear to a young boy, weak though she was." Will blinks, frowning, and then his eyes widen. "I saw in that child a beauty unparalleled. Between the two of them, strings of silver that passed between all time and space. She was angry with me, when I tried to approach, and cast me so far from her that I could not find my way back, and cursed me to always live in shadow, so that I could not even touch the light of her child."

"You saw me," Will breathes. "Back then?"

Hannibal nods. His eyes are far away. "I could not hunt, I could not approach. I thought, for a time, that it would simply be a single, flickering star in my memory, one of many that I would eventually move past. And then, who should stumble into my garden but that same sweet, beautiful boy?"

"You knew who I was, even then," Will says, and Hannibal nods again, his eyes sharpening on Will's face. He pets through Will's hair, smiling, and Will doesn't resist as he's given another kiss. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"What would I have gained, except possibly ruining our friendship before it had time to blink at the world? You magic called to me, Will, as I sense mine rushed to meet yours." A small tremor runs down Will's spine, and he swallows. "We were tricked by destiny twice. I will not let you be ripped from me again."

Hannibal is not lying, Will can see that.

"What would you have done?" he whispers. "If I had not done all I have, if I did not love you?"

Hannibal's eyes darken, his lips tugging down at the corners, and his fingers flex on Will's flanks. Will aches for claws. "A non-issue," he murmurs, too-lightly. Will huffs, and rolls his eyes. "Perhaps a more fitting question would be not what I would have done, but what I wouldn’t have done to make you mine."

Will shivers, bites his lower lip, and presses a hand to Hannibal's broad, warm chest. "I'm not a light, anymore," he whispers, and aches, and aches. "Yet here you are, still claiming me as yours."

"Here I am," Hannibal replies with a happy smile. "Here I will remain, forever, if you wish it."

"I think I do," Will says. "Wish it."

Hannibal's smile widens, and he cups Will's neck, and pulls him into a kiss. "Then, beloved, I will see it done."

Chapter 12

Will's concept of time has never been great, usually dictated by the much more direct needs of his animals – when to feed them, when to let them out, and so on – and the way food gradually turned to mold in his fridge and cabinets. He's never had a particularly large appetite, finding most human food too bland for him to really enjoy, and aether food too dangerous to even dare trying. Everything in the aether comes with a price – even the simple act of picking an apple could have consequences most mortals don't think about.

The weight of reality presses in on him from all sides, too dark, too stale in his own home. He sits on his porch, strong enough now to move on his own and do things like shower without assistance. Hannibal is inside, preparing lunch. It smells good, the sting of salt teasing his nose in a way it never has before, and there sits a flavor of something on his tongue that he doesn't remember ever smelling in his lifetime, but makes him think of deserts and markets where there are high cones of rich color, and he thinks the air there would be so humid, so sweltering and heavy, it would almost feel like moving through the aether again. Perhaps there are parts of the world where magic lingers, able to be felt even by those without the ability to perceive it.

The reminder of his sudden blindness makes him ache. He feels as though he has suddenly lost a limb – not a leg, no, he can still walk. Not an arm, no, he can still use both. Something vestigial, an additional rib that gave his lungs more security to breathe; wings, heavy on his back and now in their absence he is tilted on a false axis and set off-balance. Perhaps horns that kept him weighted and now, without them, he is destined to float away.

He watches his dogs play in the grass and wonders if any of them are chasing the cats.

He sighs, and dips his eyes, looking to his left to see a single wayward screw, barely-piercing the bottom of one of the posts supporting the little awning. He wraps his nails around it and tugs on it, finding that it comes free with little trouble. He turns it around in his hand, considering the rusting tip, the stripped head. It's old, so old that it's probably useless, and Will tilts his head and considers the screw for a long time. He should throw it out, before one of the dogs gets it and he has to worry about tetanus and splinters.

He sighs, and drops his eyes to an open piece of porch, wood that was once dark blue, scuffed and muddied beyond recognition. It needs another coat of paint – the whole house is in dire need of some T.L.C., he notes with a somewhat bitter huff. Vines crawl up the sides of it, the siding is cracked in places and heavily weathered, he wouldn't be surprised if the roof started to leak come spring showers. Things he has ignored, or been blind to, for so long, and now the air is damp with disuse and he feels sickly even being inside the place.

He turns the screw in his hand until the tip juts between his forefinger and thumbnail, like a short pencil, and carves a grid into the wood at his thigh. Three by three. He doesn't know if Mischa is here, if she's hanging around and keeping an eye on things, but he owes her his life. If it weren't for her, he wouldn't have made it back to Hannibal in time to survive his mother's silver.

He carves an 'X' into the center square, and sets the screw down. He waits, not watching, only making sure it does not roll down the steps to be lost, or one of his dogs doesn't become too interested in it. There comes no shift of the trees, no fluttering whisper on the wind. Will blinks at his car and imagines he can still see his stag staring back.

There is a clatter, and Will looks to his side. An 'O' sits in the bottom left corner of his 'X', and he grins. He picks up the screw and carves another 'X' in the bottom center square.

"I missed you," he tells her, for he cannot see her, and cannot hear her, but he knows she's there. In answer, the screw moves, rolling and righting itself on its tip, and stymies his attempt at three in the row by carving an 'O' in the top center square. He's already won, unless he makes a very stupid mistake, so he doesn't pick up the screw, and Mischa doesn't set it down. It lingers, on its tip like a stalagmite. "I wanted to thank you, for saving my life."

The screw moves, and next to their abandoned game, Will watches as two lines appear, parallel. Beneath them, a single curve to create a smiley face. Will wishes he could see her, wishes with all his might that he could see her smile, and hear her high, chittering laugh.

He sighs, and the door opens, and he lifts his head to see Hannibal coming to him with a plate of steaming food. Hannibal pauses, his eyes slanting to the board Will carved, and the smile, and then to a space above it where Will imagines Mischa is sitting.

He sighs, the sound sad, and sits on Will's other side, handing him the plate. Will's fingers curl around it, unused to the sensation of so much heat, for it feels thin and plastic in his hands. Hannibal, beside him, emanates a warmth much more solid. He sucks in a breath through brittle teeth and takes his fork in hand, and eats. It's a rice-heavy dish; Hannibal has been feeding him an abundance of carbohydrates to thicken him and help him regain his strength.

Will huffs, thinking of the legend of Hansel and Gretel, and the witch in the woods. How lucky they were, to have such a fine meal before they almost died. He eats without complaint, long past the point of protesting indebting himself to Hannibal. He knows Hannibal can only be here because of Will, and he seems to like the mortal realm, for he is always smiling, delighted to the bone at simply sharing space with another person.

Will swallows his mouthful, and says; "I want to hurt her for what she did to me."

Hannibal nods, like Will has said this many times. Perhaps he has – he slipped in and out of fever so often, before he got better, he's sure he might have said, incanted, cried out for many things. Hannibal's warm, large hand flattens on Will's thigh, merely resting there as Will continues to eat.

"As do I," Hannibal replies. "But, still, I cannot reach her. And now, neither can you."

Will nods, and takes another few bites.

"Perhaps we must simply exist in the solace of knowing she is without her little birds, now. You succeeded in your quest."

Will hums. And paid such a dire price for it. But perhaps that is the nature of quests – no one realizes how big the sacrifice is going to be until it's been made. His fingers curl and tremble and his heart quickens in his chest.

He looks to Hannibal, finds him pale and drawn in the grey midday light. The sun-cat is there, above them, Will is sure, but the world looks so much more dim, and now he's starting to wonder if any of what he used to see in the real world was, in fact, real. Even with his glasses, the world was so much brighter, the air so much thicker and more vibrant. Even the grass looks dull to him now.

Hannibal, too, appears faded and thin. He does not sweat, he does not flush; his hair and face and clothes are in perfect order as always. Will doesn't think he even sleeps, merely lays with Will and pretends. But; "You can't stay here forever," he murmurs, and aches, when Hannibal's amber eyes slide to him. "I see it weakening you."

Hannibal's lips press together, and he wets them, and nods, his hand squeezing Will's thigh gently. Will shivers, and goes back to eating, lets the warmth of the food and the saltiness dry out his tongue and the wetness building up behind his eyes. For this he knows – he loves Hannibal, deeply, and they are bound together still. He wonders if this is how his father felt, and thinks it no wonder that the man wept so often when Will was a child.

"I cannot stay," Hannibal finally says with a small, conceding sigh. "But if I were to return, you could not come for me, not as you are."

Will knows this. Without his magic, trying to cross into the aether on his own would be impossible, and far too dangerous, for he wouldn't be able to see the world for what it is. Without Hannibal to protect him and without his magic to keep the portal closed, it runs the risk of becoming an open gate, and all sorts of terrible things might cross over and back. It would be chaos, destruction, the ruin of the world.

But Will is selfish, and possessive of his love. He sets the plate to one side, 'tsk'ing when Buster comes over to investigate what's left of the food. He receives a bark, and then Buster runs back to Winston and joins him in play.

He takes Hannibal's hand in both of his own, lifts it and kisses his knuckles, his eyes on the forest where he knows, he *knows* the garden lies. But he would not be able to reach it, as he is now. He meets Hannibal's eyes. "You told me there are ways," he murmurs, and Hannibal's head tilts. "For you to remain here with me. Our contract is unfulfilled – I promised you a vessel, and a welcome in my home, and you only have half of that."

Hannibal smiles, revealing teeth that are sharp, but human. Will aches.

"Yes," he replies in a purr, and cups Will's face, drawing them together until their foreheads touch. Will's eyes close, and he breathes out shakily, curling into Hannibal's warmth, for only when he touches Hannibal does he feel even close to his former self. When Will touches him, he can imagine feeling his cats, as well, rubbing against his thighs, purring; he thinks he can feel the gaze of the sun-cat, hear the whispers of the trees. His body knows what this is, recognizes the sensation of magic, and it aches like a phantom limb. "It will require much more sacrifice on your part, my love; something I feel I have no right to ask of you."

"I'm already yours," Will breathes, and that much is true. "Consider me your hands in this world: ask it of me."

Hannibal sighs, and cups Will's face with both hands, his touch so gentle, so soft. "This form is impermanent – a glamor." Will nods, knowing this. "It takes great strength for me to maintain it, to hide what I am from those with the ability to see." Will nods again. If Hannibal did not maintain his glamor, Will wouldn't be able to sense him at all, not without his magic, or his sight.

"If I were provided something empty," Hannibal continues, "something that was brought to me, and that I could possess fully, I would be able to use it, and remain here."

Will blinks, and frowns. He pulls back so he can see Hannibal's eyes. He thinks he knows where Hannibal is going with this, but he must be sure; "You could use me."

Hannibal smiles, and tilts his head. "Yes, darling, but you could not."

Will blinks, his frown deepening. It is true – Will has heard of things like this. Demons, possessing human bodies, using them for their will, but to do so completely overtakes the human inside it. And Hannibal is not a demon, not in the traditional, religious connotation. There isn't enough room in Will for both of them.

Without his body, without his magic, Will cannot go to the aether on his own. But Hannibal could bring him there. "I would die," he rasps.

Hannibal nods. "But you would be with me."

Will pulls back, letting Hannibal's hands fall from him, and stares, frowning, at his feet. He shakes his head. "I can't do that," he says, weak at the neck. "It's dangerous in the aether for me, now, and there's still work for me to do here. Jack…" *Jack*. And Alana. Will cannot abandon them. "And I would waste away."

Hannibal sighs. "I would take your body to my garden," he murmurs, and takes Will's hands. Draws his fingers feather-light up his wrists, "And I would take from you everything that I could. I would draw out your conscience, your essence, and plant it there, so you would remain. If your magic lingered, you would be safe there." He sighs again. "But, yes, you would not be able to return."

"*If*," Will hisses. "So you don't even know if it would work."

Hannibal shakes his head. "What you are, Will, what you and I have…it has never been done before. No one, I think, of my kind, has loved you like any mortal has been loved."

"If it didn't work, you'd be alone again," Will whispers. "And I would be gone."

"As I said – a great sacrifice. A great risk." Will lifts his eyes, swallows harshly, and presses his lips together. "But if I succeeded, we would be together. Free, in my home, far away from anything that would hurt you." He reaches forward, and in his eyes shines bright, deep longing, and Will shivers as his face is touched again, cupped by a gentle hand.

"Would you even come here, if I was with you?" Will asks. "What use do you have for my vessel if I'm planted in your garden?"

"None," Hannibal purrs. "I would never be parted from you. But your sacrifice would remain the same; your life, for eternity with me."

Will's eyes dip down, to his hands. His fingers curl, tips of them still pinked from the weight of holding his plate. "Is that why you're strengthening me?" he asks. "So that I can give everything I have." He doesn't see Hannibal nod, but he knows he's right. His upper lip pulls back, his heels rise, wanting to run, to flee. But where would he go?

"I know what I'm asking is not a light thing," Hannibal murmurs. "And you need not give me an answer today. Or in a week, or a year from now. I only ask that you consider it."

Will swallows. He doesn't have that kind of time – Hannibal cannot remain here forever, and if he can't come for Will, and Will never regains his magic, then when he leaves, it will be for good. Not even Mischa could ferry either of them across.

"I need to think about it," he says, and wonders even as he says it, if he truly has the freedom to. His contract, after all, is unfulfilled, and his debt will eat away at him, burn him from the inside out. He raises his eyes, meets Hannibal's, and cups his wrist.

Hannibal smiles, the expression sad. "I have waited for you, for many years," he says, quietly. "I can endure as much as you need me to."

Will nods, aching, stripped to the bone like that damn screw. He leans in and Hannibal meets him, and the kiss they share is warm and chaste. Hannibal's hand slides into his hair, tightens and pulls, and Will kisses him again.

"How much longer, do you think, until you have to go?"

Hannibal hums, his lashes low, his eyes bright even in the muted light. Without his sight, he cannot see Hannibal properly, but he shines nonetheless. "A few days, at the most," he says, and Will swallows. That's not much time at all. "If we were to move to a place where your magic was stronger, I would be able to stay for a longer time."

He means the basement. Will nods, and stands, gathering the screw so his dogs don't eat it. Hannibal rises as well, picking up his discarded meal, and Will takes his free hand and draws him inside.

Chapter 13

Bereft of any other choice, Will calls Alana and asks her to come help him with his dogs. He still doesn't feel well, he tells her, and they require a lot of energy, more than he has to spare.

In truth, he needs to talk to her. Alone.

Hannibal remains in the basement, out of sight but never out of mind. It is nearing dusk on the fourth day since Hannibal asked that Will allow himself to be spirited away forever, and he can tell that Hannibal is exhausted, drained beyond measure without Will's magic to give him energy to remain here. He thinks it funny, that as he becomes used to living as a mortal man, as the air turns thinner and easier to breathe and the sun doesn't glare down at him quite so harshly, as the sounds of clicking nails from his dogs and the scents of overly-salty meat become more comfortable to him, Hannibal is fading. It is opposite effect: as Will gets stronger, Hannibal gets weaker, and Will wonders if what Hannibal is feeling even comes close to the way he had opened Will up, bled him dry to let flowers bloom, and if his stomach clenches with sour hunger and his head hurts from keeping his glamor in place.

For without it, Will cannot see him. His eyes, now, are darker than black, not so much color as nothingness, and his skin seems thin and gaunt, and Will can see veins and pulsing blood beneath it. Hannibal's nails are cracking, his lips thin and chapped, his cheeks colored with fever-like pallor and also dark, dark circles beneath his eyes.

Will wonders if he ever looked that tired.

He presses a kiss to Hannibal's forehead, as his monster shivers and curls up, and Will is sure that, though he can't see them, Hannibal's cats are crowding around him to keep him warm. He aches, deeply, but not as bad as before – what felt like physical pain, weight and whip-strikes is now wholly emotional. He hurts because his love is hurting.

"I'll bring you something to eat, when I'm done with her," he murmurs.

Hannibal closes his eyes, breathes out. Still, despite his weakness, he is warm when he cups Will's face and pulls him into a chaste, sweet kiss. He tastes like ash and Will shudders, aching for it, his shoulders rolling up, back arching as Hannibal pets down his spine.

"My sweet friend, food on his plane provides nothing to me," he says.

Will nods, swallowing tightly. "Perhaps Mischa will bring you something, then." He stands, touching his lips, noting that, now, the burn of Hannibal's kiss fades quickly, and leaves no stain that he can see. "I'll leave the door open for her."

He goes upstairs and keeps his promise, the red door swung wide open and held there with one of the closed cans of paint. Winston eyes him curiously, head cocked, but none of his dogs go to investigate. Will fixes coffee, and pulls out what tea he has that he can remember her liking. Food-wise, there isn't much, but she knows by now not to expect anything worth eating when it comes to visiting him. At least, not until Hannibal showed up.

Her car pulls to a halt in a cloud of clear exhaust, and Will sighs, for he cannot see his stag but knows it is nuzzling Alana as she passes through it. She grins at him brightly and he smiles, lifts a hand in a wave, and opens the door for her, ducking back to allow her inside.

"Wow," she says, and taps his cheek. "You're looking so much better."

Will's smile fades, somewhat. He presses a hand over the bandages still wrapped around his torso, hidden beneath his shirt, and heaves a sigh. "I feel better," he replies. "Still not quite up to, you know…" He gestures, to the house, to his dogs – cocks his head, and nods to the manila folder tucked under her arm. "What's that?"

Alana huffs, rolling her eyes, and goes to his little dining table, shrugging off her coat and setting her purse on top of the file, on the table. "Jack heard I was coming to see you and basically breathed down my neck the entire way to my car, until I promised I would give you this."

Will raises a brow. "I technically work for Jack," he says, and doesn't know if it's meant to be an explanation or a reminder to himself. "He brought me on after the work I did for Abigail."

Alana blinks at him, pressing her lips together.

"How is she?"

"She's…shaken, still, but she's responding well to group therapy as far as I know. I've visited her a few times." Will nods, accepting that, and then abruptly snaps to attention, remembering his manners.

"Do you want coffee or something?"

She smiles at him, sweet and fond, and though it hurts to look at her, it hurts in a different way now – he has always loved her, like a dear, dear friend, the same way one might love their favorite song or color; to always want to be around her, bathed in the soft glow that shone through her from the aether, Will is settled in her presence. Now, he cannot see her as he once did, but his lack of magic has not taken away any of his affection.

She follows him into the kitchen and he shows her the tea boxes, pleased when she selects one and starts boiling water in the kettle that Will didn't own before Hannibal started to court him. They wait, in comfortable silence as the water heats, Will sipping his coffee lightly, leaning against one of the counters.

She looks back, towards the red door in his hallway, and tilts her head. "I don't think I've ever seen that door open before," she says.

Will swallows, instinctively wanting to brush it off, but she wanted to learn about the aether, and if – *if* – there is ever a time where Will isn't here to protect her, she will have to be aware of the motions and movements of this house, the power that lies within it, buried in the walls.

"There's a portal down there," he tells her, and her eyes snap to him, and widen. "It's how I manage to…go where I go. See what I see."

She blinks at him. "So, is it like a gate, or?"

Will smiles, and shakes his head. The kettle clicks off, water bubbling, and she takes it from the heating element and pours it over the bag of green tea sitting in the bottom of, Will thinks, the oldest mug he owns. From the college days, emblazoned with the New Orleans University logo – Will didn't go there, but his cousin did, and for a while most of his Christmas and birthday presents were the kinds of things you could buy on a college campus.

"A gate, in that it can open and close. Not a gate, because it won't open for just anyone." Will presses his lips together, sighs, and looks down at his feet. "I've lived here a long time, Alana. The house…it knows me. It changes around me, has changed around me, so when I go down there, and cross over, it's…easy. But it probably wouldn't work for anyone else."

"Is the red significant?" Alana asks, taking a spoon and absently stirring in a large dollop of sugar into her tea. She looks up, and Will smiles, and lifts his shoulder in a mini-shrug.

"Not particularly," he replies. "It stands out, even at night, though."

Alana eyes him, for a long, long time. Then, very gently, in that way people speak when they're trying not to show fear, she asks; "Why is the door open now, Will?"

Will swallows, his throat going abruptly tight, and he scuffs his heel against the floor. "That's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about," he murmurs. He presses his lips together, straightens, and heads for the front door. She follows him out, mug in one hand, coat slung over the other, and there are two chairs on the porch, now – he knew she was coming. He takes one, and she takes the other, handing him her mug while she puts her coat back on.

"Aren't you cold?" she asks, taking it back and shivering, resting her lips on the rim and letting the steam warm her face.

Will shakes his head. "For a while, I felt like I was burning up from the inside," he tells her. "Even past the fever. Now I don't feel the cold – I like it. I like how…sharp it is. How everything trembles in it. People don't shake like that when they're warm."

She's looking at him like Jack does, when he says something strange. Will sighs. "I need to tell you some things, Alana," he murmurs. "But I'm worried. Some people don't react well to learning about the other world that exists within our own. More still, if they ever see it, can go crazy. I don't want you to go crazy."

She hums, but doesn't brush off his concerns and doesn't argue with him, which he's thankful for. "Maybe…" she begins, testing, and tilts her head to one side. "Abigail told me that it helps, sometimes, if she would talk about the things her father did as if she were telling a story. With made up characters." Will's brow creases, and he presses his lips together, tilts his head up and lifts his eyes. The sky is orange now, black at the top of the dome, fading to dark blue, a streak of pink. Even without magic, it's beautiful, but Will cannot see the night-cat yet.

He brushes his thumb over the corner of his mouth, sighs. "I can try that," he says.

She smiles at him in encouragement, settles into place in her chair, content to warm her hands and throat with her tea and wait for him to start.

Where to start.

"Once upon a time," he begins, and rolls his eyes when she grins at him, but folds one leg over the other and lets out a gentle sound of encouragement, shivering as the air drops a few more degrees. Will sighs, and pushes himself to his feet. "There was a woman," he says, and goes to a folded blanket that he keeps tucked by the towels and shampoo used exclusively for his dogs. The blanket itself is clean, if a little fur-covered, and he unfolds it, dusts it off, and brings it back to her, placing it over her lap. "She kept a lot of birds."

Alana blinks up at him, but doesn't speak, as he takes his seat again. It's close enough to the railing that he can swing his heels up, crossing them, and slouch in his chair.

"Every bird she kept was someone she wanted to protect. A little girl that she had claimed, their souls." He waves his hand, and pets over his lower lip, remembering those strange creatures – the robin, the doves, the silver fountain that stole his magic. He shivers. "One day, she tried to claim the soul of a young girl, that a man had tried to save. He felt close to this girl, and wanted to protect her, and knew she would be doomed to live the rest of eternity as one of this woman's pets, if he failed."

He pauses, and doesn't look at Alana. Watches the sky darken further still, feels his skin shiver and twitch in the cold.

"The man was special," he says. "He was weird. It wasn't just anyone who could approach this woman. She was a powerful witch, and it had been a long time since anyone but her little birds had been allowed anywhere near her. But the man went, because he wanted to save this girl. He rode for many days, until he was near-dead from hunger and exhaustion, and climbed a huge…cliff…"

His eyes lift, and he curls his fingers against his jaw, remembering the way the rock had melted and molded to him, allowing him to climb. The long, pale line of yellow sand, the shards of glass and dancing stars.

In the wake of his silence, Alana asks, "Did he save her?"

Will's mouth twitches at the corner. "He saved all of them," he replies, and his chest grows very, very tight, like his ribs have decided to attack his lungs, lest he say any more. Salt stings his eyes, clings to his lashes, as he stars up at the sky, watching the stars begin to twinkle and flare to life now that the sun-cat has gone to bed.

He wonders if Hannibal is cold. If he even feels things like that.

"It came with a terrible price."

Alana sits forward, trying to meet his eyes, but Will can't look at her. "What happened?"

"The man was in love," Will breathes, and flinches, presses his hand over his stomach. It tenses up, muscles and torn tissue aching sharply, and he sucks in a deep, shuddering breath. "Still is, he still is in love. And the woman hated his love, for they shared a rivalry that went back to when the man was still a boy. Beyond that, even."

His eyes close, and he wipes his fingers over his cheeks before they can fall.

"The man was told that, if he wanted to free the birds, he would have to forsake his love, in a way that meant they would be separated forever. He agreed, but the way the magic worked, her poison targeted the person who first sought out the other. She thought the man's love had corrupted him, and wanted to hurt her rival, and she thought that the man's love would die as a result of her deal."

He falls quiet again, swallowing harshly, and rubs his hand over his stomach, able to feel the coarse gauze and the ache underneath. This is the only thing that physically hurts, now, but it may as well be a brand on his mind for how much it aches.

Alana makes a quiet sound, and reaches out, taking his hand and squeezing his fingers gently. He opens his eyes, breathes in, and looks at her.

"It didn't happen that way, did it?" she asks gently.

Will shakes his head. "I sought him out, first," he says. If she's surprised at the gender, she doesn't show it, just gives him another nod, a sweet, encouraging smile. "I asked him to be with me, first. I – I asked him to kiss me, first, when he said he wanted to." Another tightness settles behind his eyes, and he takes his hand from hers, wiping his face to brush them away.

"What happened, Will?"

"The – he called it poison. Said he had to cut it out of me. My magic went with it." He shudders. "I can't see the aether anymore, Alana. I don't feel it, any more than you do. I can't cross between this place and that place anymore, I'm…" He hisses the word, "*Human*."

She sighs. "You've always been human, Will," she says gently, her tone subtly scolding, for implying that to be human is to be lesser. But how can she know, how could she possibly know, how it felt to touch his hands to something as powerful as Hannibal? How it feels to consume the flesh of his flowers, to bathe in the brilliant teal and lavender glow, to breathe in air that is thick and neither warm nor cold, and feel invincible in the darkness?

The real world, in contrast, is grey and lifeless, and Will swallows.

Then, she stiffens, and Will looks at her, finds her staring into her tea with a heavily-furrowed brow. "Wait," she says, slowly, and lifts her eyes. "Does Hannibal know?"

Will swallows.

"He knows," he replies. After all, from Alana's perspective, he and Will are essentially strangers. There's no reason to think that they have spent any time together since Will was

able to move on his own again – it's not like Hannibal has a car, or has left Will's side, so there's no sign of him coming or going.

But he will go, soon. He doesn't have a choice.

She nods, absorbing that. "Does…the man's love, what happened to him?"

"He's fading," Will says, and it hurts to say. His fingers curl against his stomach and he wishes he could claw at it, wishes he could open himself up and pour the last of his blood into the ground. Maybe Hannibal would keep his promise then, and hunt Will through every afterlife until they were together again. "The man's magic made it possible for them to see each other. Now it's gone."

Alana, despite only being told half the story, makes a weak, concerned sound, and touches Will's hand again. "Is there nothing you can do?" she asks, shedding the façade of this bedtime tale that is somehow so much sadder than he had considered it to be, when he began it. Perhaps, once, it was a tale of adventure, and love, and joy, but now it has tapered to loss and betrayal. Hannibal will return to darkness, cursed to remain, and Will…. Well. He supposes he would try to do what humans do.

"Is there nothing that can be done?"

Will sighs, through his teeth, bracing his heels on the railing and tipping his chair back so that, for a moment, it rests only on two legs, before he lets it settle again. This is where things get tricky.

"The man was offered a choice," he says. "But it's dangerous. And it might not even work."

"What is it?"

"Basically, death," Will murmurs, and tips his body forward, his chin lifted as he seeks out the night-cat, finds it blinking down at him – though, now, it merely stares with one half-lidded eye open, for Will cannot see its second, and cannot see them opening and closing. Forgetting this is supposed to be a story, he says; "I have shed my blood in his garden, built enough of myself there that, he thinks, I would be able to survive if he brought me there. But I wouldn't be able to return."

Alana frowns.

"But if you stay, he has to go back."

Will nods.

"And he can't come…visit?"

Will shakes his head. "My magic is the thing that let him come here. Without it, he doesn't have the energy to sustain himself, and I can't see him…" He gestures to himself, scarred stomach and tight shoulders and stretched-out legs. "Like this."

She huffs – a short, sharp sound. "So let me get this straight," she says, and sets her tea down. "You're telling me that, right now, you've…fallen in love with something in the aether, and your choice is between ceasing to exist in this world, or never seeing him again."

Will swallows, sets his teeth on their edges. "Basically."

"Well, that's bullshit!" Alana snaps, and pushes herself to her feet. Will straightens up, his feet touching the floor, blinking up at her in surprise. "I refuse to accept that. There has to be something we can do."

Will sighs, and his eyes drop to the top step on his porch. Still there, beneath muddy pawprints, is the half-finished game of tic-tac-toe and the smiley face. His head tilts, considering. His fingers drum in slow succession across his stomach.

"I don't know," he murmurs, and lifts his eyes again. "But I don't have that kind of time. It's a matter of days, Alana."

Her eyes fix on him, and she presses her lips together, and nods. She goes back inside to fetch her purse, and emerges, slinging the strap over her shoulder. "How long can you give me?" she asks.

Will winces, wants to rise, but his stomach hurts – he needs more painkillers, soon. And he's certainly in no fit state to chase her. "Two, three days," he replies. "Maybe."

She nods, and there's a jingle of keys as she slips her fingers through the keyring and pulls them out of her pocket. "Alright," she says, and stops on the porch, turning back to him and fixing him with a stern look. "I'm going to ask around, see if I can find anyone who might be able to help. Your *only* job is to not do anything stupid while I'm gone."

Will shakes his head. "It's too dangerous -."

"Yeah, Will, I know it's fucking dangerous. You damn near almost died over a flock of *birds*." Will huffs, and wants to roll his eyes, but he's never had her yell at him before and it's a novel, if disconcerting, experience. He doesn't want to make it worse. "But you can't really stop me, and if it's a choice between you dying or being miserable for the rest of your life, it's not really a choice."

"Alana!"

"*What*?"

Will huffs, rubbing his hand over his eyes, and tips his head back. His brain feels like it's soaked in lemon juice, bleaching and drying even as he drowns. He sighs. "Take Winston with you," he tells her, and lifts his head again to meet her eyes. "He's…used to seeing some things. He'll be able to warn you if there's something near that shouldn't be near."

She presses her lips together, and nods, and goes back inside. When she returns, Winston is in a collar and leash, and his ears perk up towards Will, his mouth hanging open and then

parting in a wide yawn. He shakes himself off and Alana clicks her tongue, leading him out to his car.

"I'll be back as soon as I can!" she calls, as Winston climbs into the passenger seat. Will sighs, standing as she turns around and drives away, and retrieves her mug, carrying it back inside and setting it on the counter.

He pauses, considering, and, decided, starts the kettle again, pouring a new, large mug of tea once it's done. It's very warm in his hands, and he grabs the duvet from his bed and carries both down to the basement, finding Hannibal just as he'd left him.

He presses the tea into Hannibal's hands, smiling when it's taken with a surprised, grateful smile. "I'm not completely useless," Will teases, and brushes his hair from his face. He settles beside Hannibal, wrapping the blanket around them both, and doesn't miss how Hannibal's weight leans against him. Will turns his head, kisses his cheek, and taps the bottom of the mug. "Drink up. It'll help keep you warm."

"Thank you, Will," he murmurs, and takes an obedient sip. He gives a pleased hum, smiling, and in the darkness Will can't see the edges of him. It's terrifying, because if he can't see Hannibal's human form, it means not seeing him at all.

He wraps his fingers through Hannibal's, squeezing as tight as he can, feeling bones brittle, skin like paper.

Hannibal sighs. "I don't suppose you've decided on an answer to my offer," he murmurs. "Or, perhaps, you have decided."

Will shakes his head. "No," he replies, and cups Hannibal's face, drawing their eyes to meet. "I'm not leaving you. If…if it comes to that, I'll follow."

Hannibal blinks, brow creasing. "Then why are we still here?"

"I told Alana everything," Will confesses. "Or, as much of everything as I could. She wants to help – she made me promise to wait, to see if she could find an answer. I told her I would wait as long as I could." He sighs. "As long as you could."

Hannibal doesn't answer, but Will's eyes close as he's kissed, gently, in the center of his forehead. "Then I wish her all the luck in the world," Hannibal murmurs, and he sounds tired. Will clings to him, watches him drink until the mug is empty, and then Hannibal's eyes close. He wraps an arm around Will and pulls them tight together, in the darkest part of the shadows, under the stairs.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

please note the new tags and the updated rating!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will doesn't expect to hear back from Alana any time soon. Frankly, he doesn't expect to hear back from her at all. He remains with Hannibal in the basement, too-aware of how little time they have left together, one way or the other. It's getting harder and harder to see him in the darkness, and when he tries to touch him, or kiss him, it feels as though he's trying to hold smoke, trapped within paper, barely contained.

The only distraction Will has is the folder Alana brought him, which he takes while venturing upstairs to gather more food and warm tea, let his dogs out, and go to the bathroom. He sleeps by Hannibal, now, and eats with him, feeding Hannibal as Hannibal fed him, what feels like a lifetime ago.

Inside the folder are so many DMV photographs that they fall out when he opens it, and he blinks down at the pile of them in his lap. Pressed to the inside of the front of the folder is a sticky note – "Can't figure it out. All missing persons, no bodies, can't find them.", then an 'XOXO – Bev'. Will frowns down at it, recalling, vaguely, the sharp-tongued woman that would sometimes be at crime scenes he helped Jack with.

Hannibal stirs, turning his head and pressing his clammy forehead to Will's cheek. "More lost birds?" he murmurs, and even his voice is hollow and thin.

Will nods, correcting the pictures and gathering them up. On the back of each is a small blurb, detailing physical description, age, places last seen, time missing for, stretching back for several months, the most recent being a week ago. Different ethnicities, different ages, genders – no rhyme or reason for it that is immediately apparent.

Hannibal hums, his fingers curled around another mug of tea, and he takes a sip. "Given how we met, I find it strange that your superior would ask you to look at such a grand design."

Will frowns. "Do you think these people are all worth less than Abigail?"

"I think you think they are," Hannibal replies, his chest rattling around another soft exhale. Will presses his lips together, but doesn't argue. Hannibal nuzzles him again and Will turns his head, pressing his nose to his flat, greasy hair. Breathes in, and doesn't even smell his flowers anymore.

He aches, and closes the folder, setting it to one side. Those things can wait – Hannibal can't. He might disappear at any moment, already so weak, his veneer so thin, that Will barely feels

the warmth of him when they kiss, feels no flicker of his fire, tastes no ash.

He swallows, that ache growing claws, and takes Hannibal's mug of tea, setting in on the folder, and moves, climbing into Hannibal's lap. Hannibal's human form is larger than him, but not by much, and he blinks up at Will in the darkness, lips parting as Will cups his face and kisses him deeply.

Even though it's not the same heavy pulse of magic, Will is warm, when Hannibal's hands flatten on his hips, just resting there. Will kisses twice, because questions are paid for with kisses, but the third is all his own, his hands sliding into Hannibal's soft hair as he rolls his hips, wishing Hannibal would grip him tight enough to hurt.

"Will," he breathes, his eyes wide as Will presses tight to him, seeking his warmth, his strength. Hannibal growls as Will shivers, blood rushing, his mouth parted in a soft gasp, and he says; "What are you doing, darling?"

"I need you," Will whispers, and it's heavy with truth. "If I never see you again, or if it doesn't work, I need to know what it feels like."

Hannibal's claws flex on him, and he bares his teeth in another snarl. Will kisses him – one more question, one more kiss – and reaches down between their stomachs, yanking at the button and zip of his jeans and spread them, so that his hardening cock has room.

"I'll do all the work," he promises. "Please. Let me."

Hannibal swallows, hard enough that his throat clicks – but he stares at Will with terrible hunger, his eyes black and shadowed, and when Will presses close to him again, he feels Hannibal's body stiffen and thicken in answer.

Will shivers, biting his lower lip. He's never touched another soul like this, finding that the brush of human skin against his own, when he had his magic, was too fierce and cold a thing for him to gain any pleasure from it. But Hannibal is warm, is aching, and Will loves him so much his bones tremble with it.

It's a quick, easy thing to pull at Hannibal's clothes, freeing his cock as Will shoves his jeans and underwear off, so that Hannibal can penetrate him. He needs it, with something not even hunger could compare to, and Hannibal feels so thin beneath him but this, *this* is heat, and he's thick, and Will kisses him deeply as Hannibal snarls, bucking up into his touch.

"Please," he whispers. "Hold onto me. Hold on."

Hannibal obeys with another snarl, wrapping his arms tight around Will's back as Will kisses him, licks over his uneven teeth, and whimpers when he bites down.

"If this is to be my last gift to you," Hannibal breathes, "let me give it well."

Will nods, swallowing, his heart weak with decay. He might atrophy completely, when Hannibal leaves him, and become nothing more than one of those lost, wayward souls who have known so deep a love as this, and could never find its equal on this earth.

He kisses with fervor, and shivers as Hannibal's nails dig into his back, and rake, sharp enough to split skin. Will's blood wells up, hot as fever, and Hannibal gathers it on the tips of his fingers, snarling and kissing and trembling beneath him, and slides a hand down so he can brush over Will's entrance. Will has never been touched there, but when it comes to Hannibal, and this awful ache, there is no other choice. Hannibal doesn't hesitate, doesn't let Will's tight, dry muscles or his weakness stop him – he presses deep with one blood-slick finger, claws at Will more to earn further slick, and Will feels it drip down his back, pool in Hannibal's palm to help him work Will open.

Will groans, sliding one hand to wrap around his erection, stroking slowly and rutting into the bunch and give of Hannibal's clothes, to his warm flesh trapped beneath. He kisses, hungry now, burning like he still has his magic, and imagines his skin turning black, stained by Hannibal's touch. Imagines deep claw marks in his back that will scar, to match the one on his stomach. Imagines Hannibal's mouth branding his, and he'll be branded on the inside as well. The thought makes him clench up, giving a weak whimper, his eyes closing as he presses his forehead to Hannibal's.

"My love, look at me," Hannibal murmurs, and Will obeys, because how could he not? Hannibal's eyes are alight with pleasure, now, as Will ruts against his exposed cock and gasps into the open air. He runs his fingers through Will's hair and pushes into Will with a second, the scent of blood and salt heavy in the air, much better than cloying lavender and heavy rose. Will aches, from his head to his knees, kisses Hannibal again when Hannibal lifts his chin.

"Please," he whispers, panting, sweating despite the lingering chill in the basement, for Hannibal is so warm, and feels, for the first time in a while, like he's as solid as Will. "Please."

Hannibal growls, and pulls his fingers out, dragging his palm up Will's back to gather more trickling blood, which he wraps around his cock, smearing the red onto Will's thighs. Will rises on shaking thighs, presses his lips together as Hannibal angles him, his free hand flattening on Will's hip.

Will sinks down – does not hesitate, though it burns and the intrusion is not entirely pleasant. But it's Hannibal, and that's enough for him, and he watches Hannibal's face as he clamps both hands on Hannibal's shoulders, clenches his jaw, works himself down in little rabbiting thrusts until his thighs connect with solid flesh, and he's stretched open, pierced so deeply, he doesn't think anything could compare to this.

He moans, clamping up around Hannibal's cock, testing the thickness of him, and Hannibal snarls, showing his teeth, and cups Will's neck with his bloody hand.

"You feel exquisite," he growls, and Will's lips twitch in a dazed, happy smile. He kisses his love, smiles when Hannibal gives an impatient snarl, gripping Will's hip tightly and smearing blood between their mouths, their cheeks, that his tongue snakes out to lick away. "Oh, Will, my love, my beautiful friend, you honor me."

Will shivers, gasping as Hannibal rolls his hips up, a smooth motion that forces him deep, before he settles and Will has to take over. He's stronger than Hannibal right now, his body has the instinct of a rutting animal, and wants to chase what feels good – and Hannibal feels

good inside him, and Will wraps a hand around his cock and strokes slowly in time with his rolling hips, pressing soft, shivering gasps to Hannibal's neck, to his jaw, to any part of him he can reach.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, as Hannibal cups his thigh, helps him move and roll to sink deeper, pull out further, so that when Will clamps down he feels the thrusts in his throat. "We should have been doing this all along."

Hannibal smiles, and lets out a soft purr. "Will," he murmurs. "You're lit up for me, darling, as you are. I might have gone blind."

The reminder aches, and he clings to Hannibal tightly, stifling a moan to his neck, his forehead damp with sweat as he nuzzles Hannibal's ever-steady pulse. The idea that, even then, he might have injured Hannibal is unthinkable, coils in his gut like a fierce cold, and Hannibal wraps himself around Will tightly, holding onto him just as Will asked, as Will keeps moving, chasing the friction, the heat. Though Hannibal is the one weakened, Will thinks he might shake apart.

There comes a moment, where Hannibal thrusts in and Will rolls his hips, that he touches a part of Will that stabs him, fiercely, all through his spine; pleasure so tight he almost flings himself away from it. He chokes, groaning, and bites Hannibal's neck so that he doesn't scream.

Hannibal snarls, and cups Will's head. "Take, darling," he whispers, and Will bares his teeth, bites down harder. Thin as he is, weak as he is, Hannibal splits easily as Will's teeth find the same mark he left before, sink through muscle and sinew and scar, to get to his blood, which is iron-rich and warm, rushing eagerly onto his tongue.

Hannibal goes still, trembling beneath him, and his head tips back, his eyes closing as he rests against the wall. Will lifts his head, licks his lips, and stares at him as he goes tense, gripping Will tightly. Will gasps, swallowing – he knows he shouldn't feel Hannibal finish inside him, nothing more than weight and a flicker of warmth, but it *burns*. It burns like sunlight, like the fierce gaze of the sun-cat, and Will's eyes flash, widen further, as he sees a flicker of that so-familiar gold in Hannibal's iris.

It's not possible, it can't be possible, but it's not the kind of thing Will would know. Fey don't lay with mortals, they don't mate with anything but their own kind – but Will is part Fey, he's not entirely human, and so he grabs Hannibal's face, tugs him upright, and kisses him fiercely.

"Bite," he demands, and feeds Hannibal his lip, his tongue. Hannibal snarls, his cock twitching and causing Will's sore body to flare, his teeth sinking into Will's tongue in a bite so sharp it splits him. Then, his lip, another sharp jolt of pain, another bead of blood.

Will is frantic, licking his blood and Hannibal's from his teeth, where it still lingers. He rolls his hips, feels Hannibal soaking and softening inside him, his eyes wide as, when Hannibal's gaze sharpens, there's another flicker of that gold.

"*Bite*," he demands, and offers his neck, offers his wrist. He reaches behind himself, tears at the claw marks, and wets his fingers, offering those as well. Hannibal snarls, sucking Will's fingers into his mouth, his nostrils flared wide as Will gasps, stroking his cock tightly as he watches, watches how his knuckles darken between Hannibal's lips, feels the stain of his blood branding him, sinking in like steam, warming him from the inside.

"I don't understand," he whispers, but he doesn't care. He pulls his fingers from Hannibal's mouth and kisses him fiercely, and it is when Hannibal shudders, his soft cock slipping from Will's entrance, and a thick trail of his seed follows, branding Will's thighs, burning him, that Will comes. He cries out with it, muffling his scream into Hannibal's neck, and catches as much as he can on his palm.

He lifts his dirty hand, cupped in offering, and begs, breathily; "Drink."

Hannibal smiles at him, his eyes glowing in that way they used to before, and he takes Will's hand in both his own, tilting it and parting his lips around Will's fingers, to the knuckle, licking his come from his skin like sweet honey. And Will watches as, slowly, his hand turns black.

"How is this possible?" he whispers, when Hannibal releases him, and he cups Hannibal's red-smeared jaw, his eyes wide when Hannibal swallows, and when he bares his teeth, they look sharper, fanged, like they used to.

Hannibal's eyes close, briefly, and he grips Will with a strong hand, and pets over his bitten neck. "Our bond," he replies, his voice hoarse like he had been the one to shake and cry and scream. Will's throat is tight, his eyes burning. The sensation of magic doesn't return to his skin, the air doesn't feel like it used to, but he can't deny the fact that he can *see*, glimpses.

He presses his lips together, aching. "I can't take more from you," he murmurs, thumbing over the raw-looking bite wound on Hannibal's neck. "You're too weak."

Hannibal nods, sighing, and his lips twitch up in a fond, terribly sad smile. "Perhaps, my love, it is all we're allowed," he replies. "One last glimpse, one last taste of each other."

Will swallows, and shakes his head fiercely. "I can't," he says, and his limbs feel heavy, his pulse weak and thrumming in his chest, his body shaking and sore and stained. For it comes to this: if Will takes more, his magic may return, for a time, but Hannibal would fade forever. And without Will's magic, his blood, his flesh, is useless to sustain Hannibal with here.

He doesn't think Hannibal could even carry him to his garden, now, if he tried.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs, and cups his face. "It will happen soon."

"No," he growls, showing his teeth. "No -."

"It won't harm me, darling. I cannot die here," Hannibal says with a small, reassuring smile. "But if my blood will help you, if this vessel will let you see, perhaps it will last long enough for you to find a way to me again."

Will's vision blurs, and he shakes his head again, trying to fight Hannibal away, but Hannibal is strong now, if only for a while, and catches his wrists, cradles them tight between their chests, and Will grits his teeth and snarls.

"Will," he says, and waits until Will quiets, his eyes flickering gold, his smile wide and toothy. "Beloved, please." He releases Will's wrists when it looks like Will isn't going to fight him anymore, and brushes his hands reverently over Will's torn shirt, the stinging welts on his back, the scar on his stomach and up, to his neck, smeared with blood that trickled from his bite-red mouth. "I have waited a lifetime for you, and I can do so again. Let me nourish you one last time."

Will closes his eyes, sucks in a breath as the tears fall, clinging, too-warm, suddenly. He presses his hand to Hannibal's chest, feels his heartbeat, still steady, strong.

"I don't know how," he murmurs, and lifts his eyes, finds Hannibal smiling at him, faint and tired and so in love. "You'll have to teach me."

"Of course, my sweet, beautiful friend. It would be my honor."

Chapter End Notes

before you kill me:

-yes, I used the magical healing sex trope.
-yes, it's sad, but I have a plan, I promise <3

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

> I want to warn you guys, this chapter goes from 0 to 60 REAL fast, and it gets /heavy/, and graphic. I think you know what to expect, but please note the new tags and remember, I have a plan! And this is not a MCD fic! <3

Will looks at the file as Hannibal sleeps, sighs, and arranges the photos in order of skin darkness, palest to heaviest coloration, and writes, below Beverly's note; "It's a color palette." Even draws, in a flash of intuition that he thinks is Hannibal's magic, a circle, and an eye in the center. He puts the file back on his dining room table, sighing heavily.

The body is lifeless, sallow and pale and sagging, when Will enters his main room and sees Hannibal laid out on the bed. He'd brought him up from the basement, wanting him to be warm and comfortable in his final moments with Will, and he freezes at the sight of him, watches his chest utterly still, his eyes half-open, staring up, his lips parted around a final breath.

Though he knows Hannibal cannot die here – it is merely his essence, forced to leave the suit of meat he had taken to be able to touch Will – seeing him like that makes Will sob, pressing his fists to his mouth, falling back against the wall and sliding to his heels. His eyes well with tears and he shudders, crawling to the body on the bed, cupping Hannibal's face and finds it paper-thin, cheekbones crumbling beneath his touch.

"If you can hear me," he whispers, and even his falling tears make Hannibal's skin dent and dip, "I'll find you. I won't rest until I do. I'll find you."

His back burns from Hannibal's claws, stomach aching from the healing scar on his belly, but he ignores that and hauls Hannibal up, finds that while the skin is decaying rapidly, the flesh and muscle remains strong. He carries Hannibal to the kitchen and lays him on the counter, closing the door so the dogs won't come investigate.

There is, already, a pile of blood bags in the fridge that Hannibal guided him through taking – the last of the Fey magic lingering there, if it can. Will swallows, and undresses the body, balling up the clothes and throwing them away. Hannibal's skin peels like rind from an orange, dry, even the muscle only gives scarce amounts of blood, as Will grits his teeth, hardly able to see through his tears, and tenderly rips the skin from the body, until it clings around the wrists, the neck, and the ankles.

Then, he grabs a large butcher's knife, and starts to cut. Just as Hannibal bade him; careful with the organs, don't want to ruin the meat. It falls off the bones like slow-roasted flesh, pools in heavy, thick slaps in the basin at his feet, long cuts that Will tries to keep as clean as possible. He wonders if Hannibal is watching – but no, he'd said he wouldn't be able to come here without an open invitation, and as Will is now, he has no power to extend one.

Maybe Mischa. She was here long before Will and she will remain, he is sure, long after.

He tries to feel her, as he works. Tries to catch a chitter of her laugh, a trace of movement in the corner of his eye that is her shadow, but feels nothing. Senses nothing – his hands are not warmed by his work, he barely feels the give of meat and tender innards as he peels them from the bone. The ribcage cracks and splinters under his hands, no stronger than sticks, baring Hannibal's human heart.

He pauses, there, sucking in a deep breath. Sets the knife down with a shaking hand, and cups the organ, tugging it free with a soft grunt. It is heavy, and does not yield to his touch like Hannibal's skin and bones did.

He remembers what Hannibal told him; "You must eat it raw, my love, cooking the meat will remove the magic." He swallows, grits his teeth, and sinks them into the thickest part of the heart, into one of the ventricles. Blood, fresh as a new kill, floods his mouth, rich with iron and salt, and he trembles, grips the heart tight as the blood runs down his palms, his wrists, staining him. It's black, he knows it's black without looking, and he drinks it down, swallows his mouthful of organ meat and takes another large bite. Heart strings get stuck between his teeth, flossing to his gums, his canines feel sharper than ever as he bites through cartilage and valve, consumes the ventricles, the atria, he eats it all, feels it sitting thick and heavy in his throat like the caress of the aether, and he moans, collapsing over Hannibal's carcass on the counter, for the sensation is so *intimate,* so familiar. He aches for it, and before he can hesitate, he reaches in and grabs a kidney, tears it free, and eats that as well.

"I shouldn't eat raw meat. I'll get sick."

"No, darling, I promise. I would not let you suffer."

He eats, shuddering, his hands wet with black blood and smeared over his mouth. He pushes the basin aside with a grunt, tears the ribcage open further and grabs a lung, feels as the organs and power lingering in Hannibal's used body fill him. He knows what he's feeling, he knows it, he just has to keep eating. Maybe if he eats enough, he will have enough strength to cross over and find Hannibal again.

The journey will be long, but he has to try.

So entrenched in his task is he, that he doesn't hear the door opening. Doesn't hear the shuffle of dogs, until a loud, surprised gasp makes him pause. He looks up, blinks at Alana, sees her shining as she used to. Her face is pale, her eyes very wide, her knuckles white around the door.

"…You weren't answering your phone," she breathes.

He swallows his mouthful, looks down at the lung still so-tenderly held in his hands, and says -.

Says nothing.

Alana's eyes dart between his face, his hands, the basin of organs, the open fridge of blood. Finally, the body, and she lets out a terrified shriek. "Is that *Hannibal*?" she demands, and Will frowns at her. Of course it is, who else would it be?

But -. *Oh*. Because she doesn't know it's *Hannibal*.

"Oh my God, Will, what did you *do*?"

From behind her, Winston prowls in, tail wagging wildly as he comes forward and noses at the basin of Hannibal's flesh. Will snarls at the dog, snapping his teeth, and Winston blinks at him, before he huffs, and sits as though to keep guard over it.

"Oh my God," Alana says, and steps back rapidly, holding her hands out like Will means to attack her. Will takes a step forward and she shakes her head. "No, no Will, don't fucking move. Stay right there!"

"Alana," he rasps, and his voice sounds odd, sounds like there are two of him speaking – one his own voice, soft with magic, the other a snarl; a prowling monster. He reaches for her, and his hand is black, the bloodstain sinking through his skin, corrupting his blood, leaking up his arm until it, too, darkens. "Alana, please, let me explain."

"No! Stop!" She shines, aether-bright, and Will would be on fire with joy except for the terrified look in her eyes. But he is, he is on fire, he feels like he could sprint to the stars and dance with the night-cat if he wanted to.

"I need to call Jack," she says, running a hand through her hair. "You -. You need help, Will."

Will shakes his head, steps forward and grabs her hands before she can flinch away. He holds her steady – he doesn't want to hurt her, but if she keeps struggling like that, he might have to. The thought makes him ache.

"I know you're scared," he whispers, and she stares at him, wide-eyed, her breath coming in terrified, panting exhales. She feels not quite solid, the way people normally did to him. Oh, this is magic, black and bright, slick as oil. He feels it coiling around his spine, into the cuts on his back, into the scar in his belly. Feels it warm and weighing heavy his head, feels it curl up like a purring beast in his heart, giving it new life. "You only have to be scared a little while longer. Please, let me explain."

She swallows, but must know she can't fight him like this. "You have two minutes," she says tightly. "And fucking let go of me."

He obeys, pleased when she merely takes a step back, but doesn't reach for her phone, or her gun, if she has it on her.

He wipes a hand over his mouth, looks back into the kitchen to see Winston isn't looking at the meat, has his head down and his eyes open on Will, ever-watchful. He sighs.

"Hannibal is the faerie I'm in love with."

She blinks at him, and frowns heavily. "No," she says, and shakes her head. "You barely know him, you're -."

"*Alana*," he says, and reaches for her, flinching as she does. He drops his hands. "Fey have the power to…appear to us, as people we recognize, if they're powerful enough. He was powerful, *very* powerful. I brought him here and he took that form," he pauses, gesturing behind him, "so that you would bring him to me. It was part of our deal – for his help with Abigail, he was allowed to wander in our world."

She is staring at him, gaping openly, and then swallows. "But…I knew him," she says weakly.

"You knew him because he wanted you to know him. I wouldn't be surprised if he influenced you in some way."

She shakes her head. "This isn't possible." She lifts her hands, wanting to touch her mouth, her neck, but freezes and flinches at the smear of blood on her hands. On her skin, it looks red, and glimmers brightly in the sun-cat's eyes. "This isn't fucking *possible*, Will – you know what I see? I see the body of my mentor and friend strung out and you eating his fucking *organs*. What the *fuck*?"

"I have to!" Will snaps, snarling at her. She takes another step back, her scent heavy with fear – odd, Will doesn't think he's ever been able to smell that on a person before. It's sharp, sour, and his nose wrinkles. He wipes his hand over his mouth again and turns away with another snarl.

"I have to," he says again, softer this time.

"Why?"

"Because it's –. It's giving me my magic back," he says. "If I eat him, I'll be strong enough. I can go to him, I can be with him again." He turns back to her, hopes she can see how desperate, how serious and dire a situation this is. "I have to be with him, Alana. This is the only way."

"Will, you're sick," she says, too-gently. "You need help. I can help you. Jack can help you. This has…" She swallows, and gestures to him, to his bloody hands and mouth, to the body in the kitchen. "You've been on edge for so long, and so sick, you need help."

"I need *Hannibal*," he growls.

"You killed him!" she yells back, and her eyes brighten and grow soft with tears. "For fuck's sake, Will, can't you see how Goddamn *twisted* this is? What if none of it's real, what if you're just…like this, and it's all in your head?"

"How can you say that? I've *helped* people!"

"You're not helping people now – you've just killed a man!" she hisses, tears falling now, smearing her eyeliner so she, too, is consumed with black. "Jack told me about Hobbs, too – you gunned him down in cold blood. You need *help*."

"You wanna help me? Go away," Will snarls, and advances on her again, until she steps back. Until she's pressed flat to the front door, pale and wide-eyed with terror. "Let me do this, and you'll never have to see me again. I'll go be with Hannibal, where I belong. Where I *should* be."

"Will," she whispers, and shakes her head again frantically. "I have to call Jack. You have to let him help you."

"Call him if you have to," Will snaps, and turns away from her, striding to the kitchen. "I have to do this."

"Will!"

He slams the door, kicks savagely at the handle until it breaks off, and kicks a towel beneath the edge so it can't open easily. "Winston," he growls, and the dog rises, tail swishing, "kill anything that comes through that door."

Winston blinks at him, licks his jaws, and Will doesn't know if he would actually hurt Alana, but he hopes she hears the order all the same – that she decides to be smart, and blind, not brave. He returns to Hannibal's body, shivers as he finds that the organs have turned limp and shriveled, sour with decay, even in the short time he had abandoned them. He shoves at the body with an enraged snarl, tears he didn't let fall before now spilling, and he drops to his knees beside the basin and the open fridge.

He takes out a bag of blood, opens it and tips it back, drinking as fast as he can. It doesn't taste good, of course not, but the flood of Hannibal's magic, his power, is enough to wash away any unpleasantness. He wipes at his hands, smiling when he sees that his entire arm is black, now. Wonders, if his mother could see him, if she would weep.

He opens another bag over the meat, dips the pieces in blood and eats those, too. Cares not for the growing heaviness in his stomach, the frantic tug on the scar in his belly that warns him against eating too much. Cares not for the blister-warmth of the sun-cat as it stares down at him, lighting the room as if trying to burn him before he can finish. He eats, and eats, and washes it down with Hannibal's blood, until his hands are shaking, his body convulsing like he's going into shock. Still, he continues on; eats and drinks until he cannot stomach another bite, until his belly is full, and the fridge and basin are empty, and the meat has piled up, clogging his chest, his throat, until it feels like his heart doesn't have room to beat and he can feel the pieces of Hannibal on the back of his tongue with nowhere to go.

He rises on shaking legs, trying not to vomit, and grabs a knife, before he staggers out the back door, towards the barn where his second portal is. On the horizon are glimmering red and blue lights, sirens wailing, and he bares his teeth at them. Sees his stag coming around the house and is so glad to see it, as it blusters and puffs up, feathers around its neck standing

on end. It comes to him and he loops an arm around its strong shoulders, letting it help him to the barn, but it cannot enter the barn, and he leaves it at the door.

He collapses on his knees, pawing at the ring of iron, crawling into it.

He sags to the floor, cheek to the cold cement, on his back. He hears, softly, a small, girlish laugh, and his lips twitch in a smile.

"Mischa," he whispers, and reaches out to her, watches her float and dance above him, her too-wide smile showing all of her sharp teeth. "Tell him I'm coming."

She nods, and disappears with another laugh, and Will closes his eyes, welcomes eagerly the press of the aether as it sits on his hips, touches his neck, pushes into his mouth as though trying to shove Hannibal further into his body. He moans, shuddering, and just as he falls under, he lifts the knife to one of his wrists and digs it in, gushing black blood, blistering hot and thick.

He doesn't have time to mark the other wrist, but hopes that, by the end, enough has spilled for Hannibal to come retrieve his body.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"In his heart, I will plant an Amaryllis flower, for there exists before him no such beauty, and will exist after him nothing of greater worth. Splendid beauty, in his hollow chest, which I have claimed as my own. I will plant this here.

Magnificence and anticipation; he has brought me both, and joyfulness beyond measure. Birds of Paradise, for his sacrifice, for his loyalty, I will plant around his feet. He will walk within a bouquet of them, until they tangle and fall with every step. Each flower will bloom a dozen more, until the world is alight with the evidence of his sweet love, and how long I have waited to taste it.

Freesia, for innocence and thoughtfulness. He came to me as a sweet spark, barely a child for all that he is a man. We had never met, and yet I knew the woman he sprang from, knew the light, the magic that sits in his bones. I will create a crown of it for him, so that all the world will know he is to be treated as a king.

Queen Anne's Lace – oh, a complex creature, no doubt, unpredictable in his wrath and love both; terribly wild, how unrepentantly and unashamedly blessed am I to know him, to have borne witness to even a spark of that beauty. He shines with it, Mischa, can you see how he shines? And sanctuary is the second meaning of these flowers. He let us in, opened his vessel and threw the gates down, bared himself and let us touch him, claw at him, let us love him. He has done so much for us, you must understand. I will put these as a collar around his neck, so I can taste them in his kiss.

The sunflower denotes pure thoughts, adoration, and dedication. It needs no further explanation. Let us put these on his shoulders, so they may grow and every living thing will tremble at the sight of them. Let them feed on his light, his beauty, his purity. I have never known a love like this, and will never know another. I adore him, every part of him, even the parts I have not yet seen."

Will feels each one, feels the tendrils of vines, smells the meat of Hannibal's magic flowers. Shivers, when Amaryllis blooms over his heart, settling heavy like a weighted blanket. Feels the Birds of Paradise encase his ankles and thighs, caressing his skin. Feels the collar and crown, and sucks in a breath, opens his eyes and sees Hannibal, kneeling beside him, a sunflower in his black, clawed hands.

For a moment, he merely stares, and then can do nothing but weep. With joy, of course with joy, to see Hannibal as he should be, clouded in the night-cat's silver gaze, his horns rising up so high they disappear amongst the stars; sees the glow of his golden eyes, his wide smile holding heat and light behind his teeth.

He reaches up, petals falling in soft, arcing swirls from his arm, and cups Hannibal's cheek.

Hannibal purrs, loudly, and turns his face, kisses black and hot along Will's wrist – his wrist, which is black too, stained and branded by Hannibal's blood. His mouth, full of it, choking him like he's drowning. He knows if he were to look in a mirror, he would be mottled with Hannibal's influence. His stomach, heavy and full of Hannibal's flesh and blood, his esophagus abused and burned to ash.

His eyes, oh, he can *see*. See the technicolor glow of flowers and thorns and those bright-budded trees. See the night-cat blinking at him with two wide eyes, sees its smile in the stars. Feels, for the first time in far too long, alive, energetic, *whole*.

Hannibal settles the sunflower on his bare shoulder, and Will shivers as he feels it take root, burrowing around his collarbone, gripping the stem of the Amaryllis flower, using his blood and magic to turn to iron and steel around his bones. He is strong, he feels stronger than he ever has, alight and awash in Hannibal's garden.

"Hannibal," he breathes, and lets his hand drop, limply, as Hannibal leans over him, cups his face, and kisses, and his magic burns, and Will aches for it. He hasn't tasted this in too long, hasn't let himself be consumed by this creature for an age, an eon. He clutches the thick mane of feathers on Hannibal's shoulders, feels the flowers on his wrists and forearms melt with them, taking them like he took the rest, and Hannibal's feathers tattoo themselves in shimmering silvers along his wrists, like chains, like bonds.

But Will is free. He's finally, finally *free*. To have never known it, and be given it so purely, Will cries.

"My love," Hannibal breathes, and Will wonders how long it seemed to him, and Will hopes it was as short as a breath. Knows, though, it must have felt like a thousand years. "I knew you would return to me. Imagine my joy, to see you here when the sun moved away."

Will can imagine it – feels it like fire in his chest, as he kisses and kisses and kisses. He doesn't need to breathe in the aether, so ignores his burning lungs, ignores the clench of his instinctual, mortal heart. Feels teeth at his mouth and magic in his veins, and aches.

"Hannibal," he whispers again when they part. He can hear Mischa laughing, and turns his head, sees her dancing and playing with the scorpion cats in a veritable feast of flowers, piled high like raked leaves in autumn. The animals chirp at her, shining brightly under the night-cat's light, and he smiles. He laughs, frantic and joyous. "I'm here."

"That you are, darling," Hannibal purrs, and helps him sit. The flowers surround him, encase him so he is only skin and petals, and he brushes his hands around the paradise at his thighs, through the sunflower encasing his shoulders, the collar of lace and crown of Freesia. Feels it etched into his hair, the vibrancy of pure creation.

"My body is in my barn," Will tells him. "Do you need it?"

"Mischa told me it has been removed," Hannibal replies, and sighs, shaking his head. Will doesn't miss his human skin at all – delights in the sight of him, black as shadow, burning with gold in his iris. Lingers, and nudges him for another kiss; he will gladly never exist for another moment without Hannibal's touch on him, his mouth, his hands, his magic.

Yet he frowns. "What happened?"

"Alana and Jack found it, found you close to death, so much blood shed from you that you were moments from leaving the mortal coil entirely." Will nods, pressing his lips together, watches the caress and shift of living plants as they embed themselves in his skin.

"I can't go back if I don't know where my body is," he murmurs.

Hannibal nods, cupping his face, and kisses him deeply. "Your magic has given me new strength, my love," he murmurs. "Give me permission to return to the world, and I will find it for you, and bring it here." He pauses. "If that's something you want."

Will nods, wincing, thinking of Alana's rejection of him – "They think I'm a murderer," he whispers, hollow with loss. "I can't go back. I don't want to go back. I want to stay here, with you, forever."

Hannibal smiles, and kisses him again.

Will shivers, digging his nails into Hannibal's feathered shoulders, moaning weakly as Hannibal prowls over him, pressing him to the ground, encased in flowers. In his periphery, he sees Mischa and the cats disappear in a game of chase, hears her high laughter as she moves into the darkness, leaving them alone.

"A great honor and gift you have given me, Will," Hannibal breathes, and Will shivers, biting his lower lip as Hannibal nuzzles his neck. His large hands spread on Will's thighs, clawed and dangerous – like this, Hannibal is so much larger than him, covers him in night and shadow entirely. "Let me give my own in return."

"Yes," Will breathes, weak and wanting. "Plant me here. Let me stay."

Hannibal snarls, shows all his teeth and fits them to the bare patch of Will's neck, above his collar of flowers. He bites, shedding blood, breaking skin, swallows his pound of flesh and Will moans, arches into the creature's claws, spreads his legs in open invitation as Hannibal fits between them, skeletal hips pressing and jutting into his soft thighs.

Will is wet with nectar, succor, his flowers pooling liquid between his legs, allowing Hannibal to rut, and press, and Will cries out as Hannibal pushes inside him. It brings with it no pain, just that same burn of magic, and Will claws at his back, rakes his nails down and feels like they are clawed, too, as Hannibal's flesh splits and grows wet beneath his hands.

Hannibal snarls, pressing deep, filling him as he filled Will with his flesh and blood, and Will groans, so full, Hannibal so large and consuming him completely. He kisses, raggedly, sucks his own blood from Hannibal's teeth and tongue, arches and feels the field ripple and explode with flowers as Hannibal thrusts into him, using his body. He's so strong, so undeniably *all*, fills Will to bursting and floods him with magic.

Vines encase his stomach, his chest, torn away by Hannibal's sharp claws before they can devour him, though they do not bring with them thorns and consumption, now – rather, they touch him like happy animals might, relieved that their master is home. The air is thick with

lavender and meat, soaking into Will's lungs. They kiss, and move together, bursting with warmth, and the night-cat closes its eyes and they are in darkness, lit only by the glow of Will's magic and the flowers around them.

"Will," Hannibal snarls, and moans as Will tightens around him, feels so full and so owned, claimed by this creature's teeth and claws. "Oh, my sweet friend, I will have you like this every moment, I will see you bloom and blossom here. Until everything knows that you are my love, that you are mine."

Will shivers, whimpering; he wants it too. He wraps a hand around one of Hannibal's horns, guides him to another kiss, breathes in and finds that his lungs are full of water; he is drowning, and yet breathes more easily than ever. This is where he belongs – too Fey, too other, to know himself in the real world, but here, he shines, he is alight and warm, finally, and moans as Hannibal takes him and makes it so.

"I am yours," he whispers, pleased when Hannibal shivers and snarls, fits his teeth to his bare shoulder and spills more blood, creates more flowers. Will has always made flowers in the aether, and now he will remain, until the living things consume all the rest.

"Yes," Hannibal growls, and tugs on his thighs, lifts and folds him and covers him in shadow. "Forever."

Will nods, heat and pleasure coiling up in his chest, igniting the metal of the flower stems, burning them to ash only to see them reformed anew, stronger and brighter. He pants, clings to his love, and comes between their stomachs with a ragged cry – so loud that the trees shiver with it, bending down to him, bowing to show his dominion over them.

He spasms around Hannibal, his body aching and sore, too full to bear it, and Hannibal goes still with another ragged snarl, pushes in as deep as possible, and floods Will with heat, magic, *life*. Fills him with darkness so Will's stomach blooms in a black bruise.

The stars are dancing, swimming behind Will's eyes as Hannibal rocks within him, slow, rolling things that make him ache and tremble. He runs his hands up Will's flanks, removing more vines, and kisses him with a bloody tongue that makes Will moan.

"Let this be the last time we are apart," Hannibal whispers to him, and Will nods.

"Go," he says, as Hannibal retreats from his body, and he can sit up. "Move within my world, and bring my body back to me, and do what you must do, for me to remain."

Hannibal smiles at him, bright with joy, and when he disappears, the night turns to day, and Will is blinded by the light.

Time moves differently in the aether, it always has, but Will cannot help worrying as one hour turns to two, then three, then a fourth. The night-cat yawns and goes to sleep, and the

sun-cat bathes the garden in soft, teal light. The grass is rich and green, and shivers with delight when Will touches it. He is awash in flowers, they go to his knees now, and he sits on Hannibal's tree stump, watches the cats as they return, only their tails visible above the long grass. Watches as Mischa follows after them and gives him a wide, open grin.

He smiles back at her, watches her dance to the second flat part at the base of the stump. She sits cross-legged and grins up at him.

He sighs, petting absently at the flowers embedded in his skin. "I suppose we are in-laws, now," he says.

She giggles brightly. "I am happy it is so."

"Me too," Will murmurs. He has never, in all his life, felt so settled and whole as this. No hurts plague his body, the air feels like it should, easy to breathe despite its heaviness. He is safe, and he is loved here, and will never want for anything.

"I will have to think of new games for us to play."

Mischa grins.

Then, her head snaps up, and the grass shivers in a flurry of moving cats. Will's gaze lifts, and his eyes widen as he sees Hannibal emerging from the darkness of the trees. The sun-cat closes its eyes, so Will can see him properly and he can move freely, his flowers providing bright lights of blue and yellow and teal, purple and orange. Bathed in that glow, Hannibal looks beautiful.

He is carrying Will's body, and Will swallows, sees it look so sallow and sunken, pale as death. He rises, and goes to his love, looks down at it and doesn't quite recognize his own face.

"How did it go?" he murmurs.

"Alana was very surprised to see me, uneaten and very much alive," Hannibal replies with a grin, and carries the body towards his tree stump. Will follows. "I explained to her what had happened, and I suppose it seemed more reasonable to her the second time around."

Will frowns. "And Jack?"

"An easy man to make see what he wants to see." He sighs. "I could not convince him that you were not a murderer, but I made a deal with him."

Will's brows lift, and Hannibal sets his body on the stump, grins at Mischa as she moves to make room, and then meets Will's eyes.

"I told him you would not return," he purrs. "That you are mine, and I will not part with you." Will shivers, and nods, lashes lowering as Hannibal cups his face. "But I told him, if he ever sought our assistance, to leave his files in your home. Alana agreed to take care of the dogs, and I told them in exchange, we would offer our help, to keep catching these monsters they hunt."

Mischa lets out a sweet chirp, standing, and runs from the clearing in a flurry of cats as Will's eyes open fully, widening, and he looks up.

"Really?" he breathes weakly.

Hannibal nods, smiles, and leans down for his kiss as payment. A second one, a third, to sate their bargain. "I would never rob you of your chance to help people, my love," he purrs. "You are a good man, Will, and I would see you continue to do good, if I can."

Will swallows loudly, his hands shaking as he touches Hannibal's chest. "You honor me, Hannibal," he breathes.

Hannibal smiles, and kisses him again. "Come now, darling, we must move quickly," he whispers, and turns away. Will nods, following behind, and they stand on opposite sides of Will's prone body – Will eyes the scar in his belly, the open wound on his wrist, the claw marks still there on his back. He shivers, and yet doesn't feel them, as he is now.

Hannibal holds out his hand and takes Will's wrist when it's given, turns it to reveal the blackened innards of it, and sinks in with two claws, ripping it open in the mimic of what Will's knife did to him. Will swallows, panting already, as Hannibal angles his arm, lets it puddle and drip in a swirl of black and red, and Will watches it dot along his body's open mouth. Sees his lashes flutter as Will's own do, sees the body tense as though trying to breathe.

But it can't breathe in the aether. It can't live, here. It would have died, if Hannibal brought him before Will passed over.

It is just meat, no more important than Hannibal's glamor, and Hannibal plants Will's arm over his body's chest, and kneels, tearing it at the scar on its stomach, opening the wound again, baring slick organs, purple and red. Will does not feel the pain of it himself, and yet he shudders, biting his lower lip as flowers bloom down his wrist, settle on the skin of his body, and there, from its mouth, grows a single branch.

It grows slowly at first, and then in a great wave, and Will watches the jaw crack, teeth splitting and falling, tongue limp and turning into a knot as the branch grows bark, grows trunk and twig. Watches, ragged and wide-eyed, as another branch blooms, through the stump beneath it, up through the open stomach and joining with the first.

"A tree," he whispers, soft with awe.

It looks like the ones that border Hannibal's garden, ripe and rich with large, orange flowers. Purple roots and spreading, brown leaves. Each organ, each drop of blood from inside, forms another. Will pulls his hand back as the trunk grows thick, watered by his blood, shooting up through the air between them, so thick that, for a moment, he can only see the jut of Hannibal's horns.

The mushrooms which are still on the base of the stump glow, and Will curls his fingers, drips his blood upon them, and the base, watches the roots shiver and flex and watches the stump merge with the tree. His body rises with it, sitting upright and then lifting in a dangle

of limp arms and legs, open mouth, still heart. Watches as all of it, too, is encased in black bark that shines with golden filigree.

He does not know how he would have survived this, and shudders at the thought that he wouldn't have.

Hannibal appears beside him, takes him in his arms and licks over the cut on his wrist, and from his tongue more flowers open, more Freesia, and dandelions already white and puffy and blowing in the breeze.

Will smiles widely, and then he laughs, and laughs, watching his body straighten and be consumed by the tree, encased in the thick bark and shining leaves, and he laughs again, loud enough that the grass and flowers burst with life, and light, bright with his joy as Hannibal embraces him, and they both watch, Will's back to Hannibal's chest, as the tree grows until it is the largest and blackest thing in the field, shining and lit from within by Will's magic, blossoming with orange and lilac and gold.

"It's beautiful," Will breathes.

Hannibal's chest rumbles with a pleased purr, his big hands settling on Will's hips, pulling him closer so their skins and flowers and feathers coil together like nesting cats. "One of the most beautiful things I have ever seen," Hannibal says in agreement, and noses at Will's hair, breathes in the crown of flowers. "More beautiful still, to know what it means, and who made it." He shivers, and kisses Will's warm, aching neck. "You are a triumph, beloved, and so powerful with your magic, your gifts, and your love for me. I will never see any of it falter."

Will smiles, and turns, Hannibal large enough that he must rear to his toes to get his next kiss.

"Will you triumph with me?" he asks.

Hannibal blinks at him, golden eyes flashing with intrigue.

"My mother has hurt so many people," Will says. His father, himself, all those girls. "She tried to hurt you, to kill you, and robbed me of my magic so that we might be forever apart," Will says, and the last words are a snarl. "I would see her pay dearly for that. She is weak without her birds, and I would have you help me find her, and hunt her, and show her what it means to hurt you."

Hannibal's smile is wide, showing all of his sharp teeth and the glow in his mouth. He kisses Will for the answer to his question; "Oh, a delightful new facet; your rage, my love, is bright and red. Yes, I will help you. I will see it done."

Will breathes out, incensed, burning with joy, with wrath, with all the things that make him human and all the power that makes him Fey. He thinks he can see, in Hannibal's golden eyes, an iris of red blinking back from Will's. Wonders if that might, too, change – if one day he will be as monstrous as Hannibal, coated in flowers instead of feathers.

It's a wonderful thought, and one that makes him shiver.

"Did Jack give you a file?" he asks.

Hannibal shakes his head. "We will know, when he brings one," he replies, and kisses the next words to Will's blushing cheek; "I taught Alana the sigil that will alert us of her presence. But I'm sure my cats will be more than happy to relay their presence as well." His claws flex on Will's hips, and his exhale is heavy. "For now, my darling, beloved, beautiful Will, there is nothing to be done but savor each other."

Will nods, swallows, and says; "Savor me, first." Hannibal growls, puts his teeth to Will's neck. Bites. Will turns in his arms, lifts to his toes again, and clutches at him, plants his teeth in Hannibal's neck – feels them sharp and splitting, carnivorous, through Hannibal's black skin. Feels his mouth flood with dark blood, with power, until it stains his throat and makes the flowers in his skin shine. "Then we will hunt together, and savor that."

"Of course, my love," Hannibal says, happily, glowing with joy, and takes Will to the grasses. "Whatever you wish."

Chapter End Notes

aaaaaaaaand there we have it! I may be tempted to post additional one-shots of this story at a later time, but for now I think the boys have earned their honeymoon. I hope you guys liked it! See you in the next fic <3

Works inspired by this one

[Restricted Work] by SparkySheep

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